

Conversations with Ella Kahu

Part 2: The First-Year Student Experience

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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 in 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.

This section, dedicated to *The First-Year Student Experience*, presents a collection of articles authored or co-authored by Ella Kahu that delve into the multifaceted nature of this formative stage. The articles explore the unique challenges and opportunities faced by students as they navigate the transition to higher education. From examining the engagement of mature distance students and their sense of belonging and interest, to investigating the emotional rollercoaster of a mature-aged student's first semester, these studies offer valuable insights into the student experience. This part also addresses the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic on student well-being and engagement, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of students during unprecedented times. Through qualitative and mixed methods research, including innovative approaches like photo elicitation, the articles in this section provide a rich understanding of the first-year student experience. They underscore the importance of institutional support, the influence of emotions and personal circumstances, and the power of engagement in shaping student success.

What do you think is the most important thing about the student experience?

The most important thing about student experiences is student engagement. Otherwise what are they at university for? They're not here to have fun. They can have fun while they're here, that's fine, but that's not why they're here. It's not why they're spending thousands of dollars.



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What are the key things that you want people to know about belonging?

I think belonging is a really interesting one because, as I said before, its position in the framework has changed as the framework has changed, and its position in my head has changed. I was probably originally a little sceptical about belonging. There's an article based on my PhD about mature-aged students, basically saying that belonging was not particularly important to most of them. They weren't seeking a sense of belonging because they were not physically at the university. They were just living their lives. They didn't want friends at university. Some of them talked about not feeling a sense of belonging, and some of them talked about just wanting to learn.

Through the postdoc, the students were interviewed by Cat once a week throughout their entire first year. We didn't have structured questions. As part of the analysis, we extracted all the data where students talked about belonging or fitting in or feeling comfortable, all those kind of phrases. From that dataset, what became really evident to us is that belonging is not as simple as making friends, which is how I think I'd been interpreting it way back when I was talking about the mature-aged distance students. Making friends is important for some people, but I would say the more important aspect of belonging is what we've termed in the article academic belonging, as in, feeling that (a) university is the right place for them, and (b) this discipline or major course, whatever it is, is the right one for them. When you look at those ideas through the perspective of the framework, what you start to see is the interweaving of the four pathways.

The pathways work so closely together, for example, self-efficacy and belonging. For instance, when a student has done their first few assessments and they haven't done well, they might start to say 'I'm not good enough. Clearly, I'm not good enough to be a whatever I'm going to be'. This will influence their self-efficacy. They start doubting themselves, and that can lead to doubting not just their choice of discipline; it can lead to them doubting that they belong at university. They hear talk that people at university are intelligent. They reflect that 'clearly, I'm not intelligent, so what am I doing here?' That is so much more powerful in terms of its potential detrimental impact on students than if they don't have friends at university. We saw this come through in the data. We had a couple of students who didn't feel like they had a lot of friends, but they were staying because they were really happy with their choice of discipline, and they were going to carry on. Another student who was going to be a journalist, partway through the first semester she started to question whether journalism was right for her. Everything she was learning about what a journalist is, and the kind of values that journalists have, she could not see an alignment between her and this discipline and that caused her some doubt. She started to question 'What am I doing here? I can't see me in that future self, so I'm in the wrong place. I don't belong'. That belonging is so much more important than interpersonal belonging.

You interviewed on-campus students prior to starting university. What surprised you about their expectations?

What surprised me was their positivity. They had high expectation of fun and shared interests with other students. Now they were studying what they always wanted to learn, it was going to be easy. They actually talked about 'at school, I used to procrastinate a lot, and that's not going to happen anymore because now I'm studying what I want to study'. That naivety was really astonishing; really, really astonishing.

Following them through the following year, and watching those idealistic beliefs get eroded by the reality of university was really sad. It really makes me cross because I don't think we set students up with the right expectations of university. I think some of that is around the business side of universities where universities have to attract students. You don't attract students by saying 'it's going to be really hard and challenging and stressful'. You attract students by saying 'come to this university. We have these clubs, and the school logo, and great student facilities and stuff, and you'll be able to do the thing that you are really passionate about'. We only tell them the positive. That's really not good because I think if they had more balanced expectations coming in they would plan their lives better. I mean, a mature-aged student said to me 'it's 10 hours a week per course, but really it's not going to be 10 hours a week, is it?'. He withdrew about three weeks later, saying 'I just don't have time for this. I've got my family. I've got blah, blah, blah'. I did an exit interview with him, and he was like 'you know, I remember when I said that, this look went across your face. What were you thinking?' I said 'I was thinking, you're wrong, mate. Especially as a new student who's been out of education for a while, it is going to take you 10 hours a week per course, if not more'. There isn't a lot of understanding of how universities work in terms of how self-directed and how much of your time you are expected to put in.

You have written about student support and help seeking. How important do you think that is?

For help-seeking to occur, the student has to already feel safe with you, and they have to already think, ‘Ella’s nice. She’ll answer my questions’, and I really find that. In my courses, I send out mass emails that look like they’re personalised: ‘Dear Cat, I see you did really well on the first assignment’, and that kind of thing. I get students who reply, and I know they must know I’ve done it by mail merge, but they still feel that I care personally about them. Then when something goes wrong, and they’ve had the email from me, they reply to that, and it’s, ‘hey, Ella, I’ve got a question I want to ask you...’ – because we’ve built that illusion.

I call it an illusion because it’s not real, because I can’t know 300 students. But I build an illusion of an individual relationship. So I think personalise, personalise, personalise, but not personalise the learning. There’s a bit of a thing happening around individual learning and individualised learning. I can’t do that. I’ve got 300 students, and I’ve got a curriculum that my 300 students need to learn. So I can’t teach you different things. But I can make you feel like an individual, like a person who matters.

Then the other thing, which I think I didn’t really understand about the framework until afterwards, is that it’s not just about what happens in the classroom. This is something that I really only came to understand once I was doing the postdoc at the University of the Sunshine Coast and started working with staff who work outside the classroom. Because I’m an academic, I’m a teacher, so I see student engagement from the perspective of someone who stands in front of students, and speaks to them, and teaches them. What I started to understand is all those wraparound services – student support, careers advice, wellbeing, they all impact on student engagement. They absolutely can and do foster belonging and wellbeing and positive emotions and self-efficacy. I think that’s really powerful to understand that those services are about student learning and student success.

When I first did the framework, I was seeing the world purely through the teaching academic’s eyes. Coming to STARS, actually, and hearing people talk who worked in student services gave me a much broader perspective of the students’ life. As an academic, I don’t see how many times students go to writing advice or go to wellbeing or go to whatever. I tell them about those services, but I don’t see what they do and what impact it has. So it’s only over subsequent years, I started to really understand that we’re all here to engage students, and we’re all helping do it. We’re all fostering that – or not, as the case may be.

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You wrote an article on metaphors of learning. What did you learn about the student experience through this lens?

I went to a STARS Conference presentation where someone had these picture cards. They had beautiful A5 size photographs of people and places and things. The person who was presenting them was saying that they’re used in a counselling situation or in research. You basically give them to people, and they choose a card and say why this thing represents whatever it is they’re talking about. We all had to choose a picture that represented what we thought the first-year experience looked like. Then people talked about it. I sat there thinking ‘wow, what a cool way to get people talking about their experience much more broadly than, how was your week?’. So I bought a set of the cards, and [laughs] Cat got to do it with our participants, which I’m a fair bit grumpy about because I would’ve loved to have done that.

The students were asked to choose three pictures that represented their first-year experience. It was so interesting. I had never done an analysis like that before. Yet, it’s so rich, it’s so interesting because what the students get is the idea of a journey.

Universities use it all the time. It's another word for the student experience. The students really got that it was a journey, but they got that it was messy, uncomfortable, ups-and-downs. Lots of students chose the rollercoaster picture. Then there was one where a person was walking up a hill, and it was snowing, and this person was trudging along. This young woman explained this. She said 'that's what it's like. It's hard, and sometimes it snows, but you keep on trudging. Then you'll get to a point where you get a bit of view, and you're like, oh wow, that was worth it. But then you've got to carry on'. It was so beautifully expressed in much better ways, much richer ways than when we asked them 'how's your semester been?'

There were students who took one look at the task, and went 'I'm not doing this. I'm no good at this kind of thing', or 'I don't like this kind of thing'. But they did it and it actually triggered a different kind of thinking, a different way of talking about their semester.

Not many students talked about their learning. It was much more about their whole life. The ones [laughs] that did talk about their learning, I think there was the picture of dry, cracked mud, describing learning as dry and boring. There was another one, which was a picture of shredded paper. He was talking about how what he was being taught was all disconnected. It was actually really disturbing how the students saw the learning. There was very little in the way of good stories about the learning, which really made me very sad.

From your research with students, do you think there are distinct types of students?

Cat and I had many conversations about trying to write an article about types of students. But it was actually too hard. I think that's one of the things that makes research into student engagement and student experiences in general so hard, because if you do follow them through time, you see how complex their interactions with the university and the rest of their life are. It can take one hiccup of something like a partnership breaking up to really throw a student. Then once they're thrown, because they're emotionally over there dealing with their personal lives, they've missed two or three weeks.

Then the assignment's due, and then they can't do it because they haven't been at class or whatever. You just get this spiral down. I think we need to somehow be more aware of that when it's happening so we are able to intervene. One of the things that I started doing when I saw students struggling or not doing so well, was thinking more about the pathways because it allowed me to talk to them about their confidence or their sense of academic belonging. I would ask 'Are you feeling like you're in the right course? Because you don't seem to be enjoying it'. It gave me new ways of asking the students things to help understand why this student was disengaging, and hopefully catch them before they've got to the bottom of the spiral. But I think it's a real challenge.

I still think that longitudinal research is the absolute best way to go, because you can ask the student today 'are you engaged in your learning?' They will go 'yeah, it's great'. You can ask them next week, and they go 'oh god, no'. You can ask them in this class versus that class. You can ask them when the assignments and essay are due versus an exam, and you are going to get different answers. So we can never really say a student is engaged or disengaged – When? Where? In what situation? Like I say, I'm a big fan of longitudinal research. I personally need to figure out a way of doing a longitudinal analysis that really shows the complexity and the variety of the student journey.

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Publications

Journal articles:

Kahu, E. R. (2012). From “loving it” to “freaking out” and back again: The engagement of a mature-aged distance student in their first semester at university. Refereed Proceedings of *Doing Psychology: Manawatu Doctoral Research Symposium*. <https://mro-ns.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/4960>

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Picton, C., & Kahu, E. R. (2022). “I knew I had the support from them”: Understanding student support through a student engagement lens. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(6), 2034-2047. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1968353>

Conference Presentations:

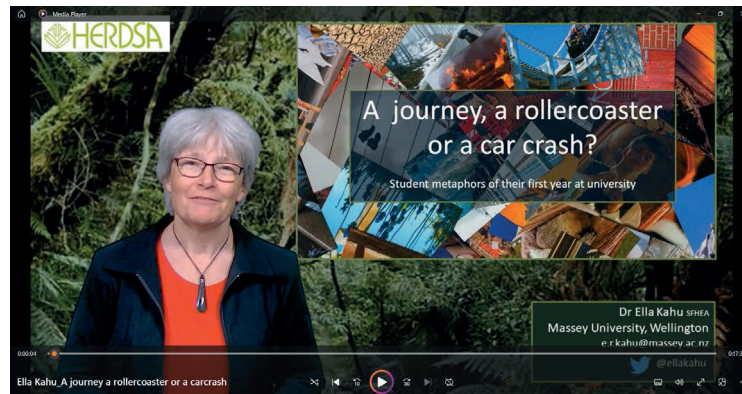
Kahu, E. R., Nelson, K. J., & Picton, C. (2016, 29 June-2 July). “I'm excited!” *Student expectations prior to starting their first year at university*. Paper presented at the Student Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) Conference. Perth, Australia. <https://research.usc.edu.au/esploro/outputs/conferencePaper/Im-excited-Student-expectations-prior-to/99450312702621>

Picton, C., Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. J. (2017, 2-5 July). *Friendship supported learning – the role of friendships in first-year students' university experiences*. Paper presented at the Student Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) Conference. Adelaide, Australia. https://research.usc.edu.au/esploro/outputs/conferencePaper/Friendship-supported-learning--the-role/99450777002621?institution=61USC_INST

Videos:

Dr Ella Kahu – Working with First-Year Students (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 3.30 minutes.

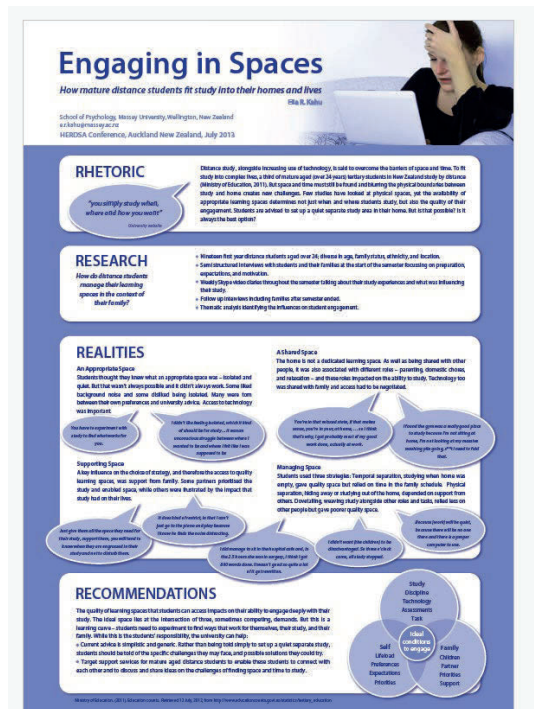
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNf9U52CPTM&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnf1&index=4>



Dr Ella Kahu – A Journey, a Rollacoaster or a Car Crash: Student Metaphors of their First Year at University (17.30 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rtrWSXHIBA&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnf1&index=8>

Posters:



Engaging in Spaces: How mature distance students fit study into their homes and lives. HERDSA Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, July 2013.



Becoming a Distance Student: Identifying and Managing the Key Challenges. FLANZ Conference, New Zealand, April 2018.



Picturing the First Year Experience. STARS Conference, Melbourne, Australia, July 2019.

<https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2019/PI6.pdf>

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