

Editorial

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2025 Student Success Conference

In 2025 the **Students Transitions Achievement Retention & Success Conference** ([STARS](#)), **Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia** ([EPHEA](#)) and **National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia** ([NAEEA](#)) joined together again to host the **Student Success Conference**.

As demonstrated in 2024, the first year of the collaboration between STARS, EPHEA and NAEEA, there was enormous value in bringing together three peak bodies whose key focus is on student success. The collegial Student Success Conference was an ideal opportunity to disseminate current research, good practice, progressive ideas and opportunities focused on enhancing access and outcomes for students in post secondary education.

This year's Conference was held at an extraordinary time in higher education. Five years on from the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, universities across the world are under increasing public scrutiny as well as political and regulatory pressures. The value of universities as builders of social capital is being questioned; funding, particularly in Australia, continues to decline in real terms while operating costs continue to rise. For public providers, we see downward pressure on non-government revenue, especially arising from international education and the movement of onshore international students who provide much needed casual workforces and enrich the cultures of our university cities and towns. The needs of industries for tertiary qualified, skilled and professionally trained workforces has outpaced the supply of graduates creating concerning workforce shortages in key industries, health and social services. In Australia, there are early signs that domestic interest in a university education is beginning to improve. However, these are modest increases and the current rate of change won't address current workforce shortages (let alone future demands), keep up with the pace of technological development and accommodate the participation patterns and needs of contemporary students.

In the midst of all this, there is a critical need for a more cohesive world. It is past time to recalibrate our approach to higher education; for educators to focus on contributing to a better future for all. We must put students at the very centre of everything we do. This is not simple. There is no single approach. But, we know that it is essential to establish learning conditions in which all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, thrive and are empowered to participate successfully and progress through to graduation in a timely way. Communities with higher proportions of tertiary graduates are safer and more prosperous, their workforce needs are met, they contribute to improved productivity, and through soft diplomacy foster tolerance and trust in an increasingly uncertain and volatile world.

The Student Success Conference provided a unique opportunity to share research and practice that will allow a collective reset about what we do in each of our institutions to put students first; at the centre of how we design and practise our teaching, enact curriculum, and support students. This Conference provides an opportunity to think deeply about what fosters student success, and how each of us can contribute to creating environments in our places of learning that lead to successful outcomes, for individual students, their families and communities. This year's Conference was an opportunity to share evidence based practices in a collegial context. Coming together in this forum will help our institutions educate and graduate students who can



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contribute to creating a more peaceful world. In the decades to come, we will need more people who understand what makes different societies work, who can work together, share human values, respect diversity, think creatively, innovate, solve problems, and most importantly care for people and protect our natural and physical environments. The Conference provided a few precious moments for us to help shape the future of higher education; this is important work and there is no time to waste.

On 30 June, delegates participated in the dedicated STARS Network Day which included an Equity Forum delivered in partnership with the Australian Centre for Student Equity & Success (ACSES) and equity-focused affiliated organisations. The Networks, including this year's Forum, provided an invaluable opportunity for various communities of practice across the higher education sector to come together and share their knowledge and expertise.

Over the next two days (1-2 July) three plenary panel sessions took place: Professor Peter Anderson delivered the first keynote, *Recentering Student Success: From Access to Achievement to Rightful Success*; A Student's Insights Panel (facilitated by Dr Kylie Austin, President EPHEA and Emeritus Professor Ron Oliver); Final keynote, *Shaping the Future: The Role of Higher Education in a Changing World* from Professor Claire Macken. Over these two days, more than 88 presentations (including the research papers and practice reports published here) and 20 posters were shared with delegates.

This special **2025 Student Success Conference** issue brings together the accepted peer-reviewed articles and selected practice reports. We were especially pleased to see the high number of submissions reflect the enthusiasm and breadth of research undertaken in regional Australian universities – as the Conference was held in Cairns, Australia.

The editorial team are particularly grateful to all the authors, reviewers, Advisory Board and the Editorial Board members, for their sustained and generous support of this open access publication.

Articles

Claudia Rivera Munoz, Chi Baik, Tracii Ryan and Raoul Mulder examine first-year undergraduate students' perceptions of university expectations, their initial intentions for involvement, and their engagement after one semester of study at a campus-based university. A questionnaire was administered to 720 students in their first semester and readministered to 180 of these students in their second semester. While first-year students' perceptions of university expectations were broadly aligned with their initial intentions for participation, their actual involvement after their first semester at university was generally lower than they had intended offers important insights into the first-year experience in the post-pandemic era.

Anna Ólafsdóttir and Sólveig Zophoníasdóttir present a study exploring students' experiences as co-creators of the curriculum in three master's level courses within a teacher education program at the University of Akureyri, a small state university in Iceland. Findings indicate that students experienced empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and care, contributing to active engagement, and increased resilience when facing challenges.

Rachel Barber explores student equity in higher education through the lens of academic language and learning (ALL) and argues that ALL remains a significant barrier to participation and success for students from equity backgrounds. Barber provides a critical, equity-focused examination of the discourses evident in the literature that shape contemporary ALL-advising practice and examines data collected in a larger case study into the first-year student experience, exploring how these discourses are evident in ALL advisers' accounts of their practice.

The transition to university remains challenging, and while universities provide orientation support, many students still struggle. **Belinda McCarten, Amanda Richardson, Lauren Raschella, Alexandra Goodwin and Elissa Pearson** evaluate the *My First Year Skills – Getting Started Module*; a support embedded in a first-year psychology undergraduate course at the University of South Australia. Findings suggest embedded transition supports in the first-year curriculum, particularly with the involvement of peer leaders, can play an important role in building students' self-reported confidence with academic skills and support their transition.

Michelle Roberts, Steven Pace and Amy Johnson examine which educator practices, as identified by students, support equivalent peer connections in online and face-to-face study modes. The authors' analysis establishes four essential areas for enabling equivalent peer connection experiences: informal conversations, initial connection opportunities, peer visibility, and educator presence.

Practice Reports

Nadine Zacharias, Elisa McGowan, Catie Gressier, Riet Kriel and Katie Douglas focus on a project that aimed to explore best practice in equity program evaluation, recognising that these are often collaborative endeavours. Through structured reflective activities, the diverse project team generated insights on factors that enable or challenge evaluation partnerships

Without doubt, student orientation plays a pivotal role in student engagement. **Zachary Fitz-Walter, Nicholas O'Donnell, Jashua Hall, Henry Sun and Justin Carter** describe the development and refinement of a game-based orientation activity: a digital scavenger hunt designed to enhance engagement, social connectedness, and campus familiarisation.

Ana Larsen, Trixie James, Gemma Mann, Kieran Balloo, Susan Hopkins, Marguerite Westacott and Juliette Subramaniam utilise autoethnography to draw on the lived experience of seven educators working in Enabling programs across four universities. The authors explore how student support was defined and enacted in their programs and what factors or resources can facilitate or frustrate efforts to effectively support students. Their findings highlight the complexity of supporting the multifaceted needs of marginalised students with more nuanced and tailored approaches.

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