

Linking Narrative Identity and Learning Dispositions to Enhance University Student Wellbeing

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Abstract

As student wellbeing concerns rise in higher education, understanding how students make meaning of their experiences may offer insight into their approaches to learning. This multistage mixed-methods study, combining explanatory sequential and convergent components, investigated how university students' narrative identity provides insight into their learning dispositions (motivation, engagement, and metacognitive self-regulation). Cluster analysis ($N = 485$) identified three dispositional profiles that differed significantly across all dimensions, with the exception of anxiety, on which two of the profiles did not differ. Thematic analysis ($N = 26$) revealed how challenges (mental health, identity struggles, lack of support) and positive reinforcements (adaptive attitudes, supportive relationships, role models) shaped students' approaches to learning. Multinomial logistic regression showed that narrative identity variables significantly improved the prediction of dispositional profiles beyond demographic and academic indicators. Findings support a dynamic view of learning dispositions as shaped through personal meaning-making, with implications for narrative-informed student support in higher education.

Keywords: University student; wellbeing; narrative identity; learning dispositions; motivation; self-regulation; mixed-methods.

Introduction

Understanding the factors that shape university students' engagement with learning remains a central concern in higher education research (Baik & Larcombe, 2023; Bowden et al., 2021; Douwes et al., 2023). Much of this research has focused on students' demographic characteristics and prior academic performance as predictors of outcomes (Blyth, 2014; Guo et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2012; Wright, 2015; Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015). Comparatively less attention has been given to how students make sense of their educational experiences through personal narrative, and how these meaning-making processes shape their broader orientations toward learning. This is significant because students with similar academic backgrounds often respond to challenges in markedly different ways (Blyth, 2014; Thiele et al., 2017; Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015), suggesting



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that factors beyond academic preparation, including how students form and negotiate their identities as learners, warrant closer examination (Brunton & Buckley, 2021).

For many students, university coincides with early adulthood, a formative period of identity development often accompanied by financial pressure, shifting responsibilities, and uncertain career prospects (Baik et al., 2019; Thiele et al., 2017). The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) and broader sector reforms have called for more holistic, student-centred approaches to support that recognise the interplay between academic, personal, and psychological dimensions of student experience (Bowden et al., 2021; Douwes et al., 2023). Responding to these calls requires moving beyond surface-level measures to understand the deeper narrative processes through which students make sense of their experiences.

Two constructs are particularly relevant to this challenge. *Learning dispositions* refer to the interrelated tendencies of motivation, engagement, and self-regulation that shape how learners approach learning (Buckingham Shum & Crick, 2012). *Narrative identity* captures how individuals construct internalised, evolving life stories that integrate past experiences with present meaning and future aspiration (McAdams, 2001). Both have been independently linked to educational outcomes and psychological wellbeing (Adler et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2021; Martin, 2009). Research extending from foundational work (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) through a growing body of recent studies (e.g., Guo et al., 2022; Lee, 2022; Lohbeck & Moschner, 2022) has examined the relationship between students' self-perceptions and their academic motivation. However, much of this work has focused on academic self-concept, that is, students' cognitive evaluations of their competence (Marsh & Martin, 2011), rather than on the broader narrative frameworks through which students interpret their educational journeys as a whole.

This article presents findings from a multistage mixed-methods study exploring the relationship between learning dispositions and narrative identity among university students. Guided by the question of what the narrative identity of university students reveals about their learning dispositions, and how these findings can be applied to enhance student support, this study integrates quantitative dispositional profiles with narrative accounts of students' educational journeys. In doing so, it contributes to efforts to develop support strategies that recognise both the cognitive and personal dimensions of learning (Bowden et al., 2021; Department of Education, 2024).

Literature Review

Narrative Identity and Learning Dispositions

This study is anchored in McAdams's (1985, 2001) narrative identity framework, which conceptualises identity as an evolving, internalised story individuals construct to make sense of their lives. These narratives integrate affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions of selfhood, shaped by both personal meaning-making and broader sociocultural influences. Importantly, narrative identity marked by coherence, agency, and the ability to make meaning of adversity has been consistently linked to psychological wellbeing, resilience, and adaptive functioning. Adler et al. (2016) reviewed evidence that narrative identity has incremental validity in predicting wellbeing beyond personality measures, while McLean et al. (2010) demonstrated links between narrative construction and identity development in emerging adults. In educational contexts specifically, Sherman et al. (2013) found that values affirmation interventions, which involved students constructing personal narratives around their core values, improved academic performance by supporting the development of more coherent identity narratives. Lilgendahl and McLean (2020) showed that narrative identity processes during the first year of college were related to trajectories of life satisfaction and mental health.

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between students' self-perceptions and their academic motivation and engagement. Work on academic self-concept has demonstrated that students' cognitive evaluations of their own competence are associated with a range of motivational and learning outcomes. In a foundational study by Pintrich and De Groot (1990), it was shown that self-efficacy and intrinsic value were positively related to cognitive engagement and performance, and that self-regulation mediated much of this relationship. More recently, Gavín-Chocano et al. (2024) found that self-regulated learning processes play an instrumental role in shaping academic self-concept among university students, while Lohbeck and Moschner (2022) demonstrated that motivational regulation strategies interact with academic self-concept in predicting cognitive learning strategy use. Further, at the institutional level, Guo et al. (2022) showed that academic self-concept is shaped by both individual and contextual factors in higher education, and Affuso et al. (2025) provided further evidence of the interplay between self-efficacy, self-regulation, and academic achievement. Studies have also examined how identity-related processes shape engagement in higher education more broadly (e.g., Kasworm, 2010). MacFarlane (2018)

examined how students from non-traditional backgrounds negotiate academic identity within Australian higher education contexts. Taken together, this body of work establishes that students' perceptions of their academic capabilities and their positioning within educational environments affect how they engage with learning.

Although academic self-concept and narrative identity share conceptual overlap, they capture different dimensions of students' psychological experience. Academic self-concept concerns students' evaluations of their competence within a given domain (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Narrative identity, by contrast, involves the construction of an evolving life story that integrates past, present, and future into a coherent sense of self (McAdams, 2001). Where self-concept research asks how capable students believe themselves to be, narrative identity research asks how students make sense of their experiences over time and what meaning they draw from the events that have shaped their educational journeys. This distinction matters because two students with similar self-concept profiles may construct very different narratives about their educational lives. One may narrate a story of overcoming adversity and growth, whereas another may describe a fragmented or unresolved journey. These narrative patterns may in turn shape resilience, persistence, and the capacity to sustain motivation through difficulty.

A small number of recent studies have begun to explore narrative approaches to student identity in higher education. Tilley (2025), for instance, used narrative identity as a methodological framework to examine the experiences of non-traditional students in Australian higher education, finding that themes of transformation and capability were central to how students understood their engagement and success. Ding and Curtis (2021) used narrative inquiry to trace the identity struggle of a first-year student, illustrating how fragmented identity narratives were associated with difficulties in academic adjustment. These studies reinforce the value of narrative approaches, but they have been primarily qualitative and have not examined how narrative identity relates to quantitatively measured learning dispositions.

Complementing the narrative identity framework, this study draws on research into learning dispositions. In line with Buckingham Shum and Crick (2012), learning dispositions are conceptualised here as the interrelated tendencies of motivation, engagement, and metacognitive self-regulation that shape students' approaches to learning. Rather than treating these as separate constructs, the present study positions them as interconnected dimensions of a broader dispositional orientation. Martin's (2009) Motivation and Engagement Wheel provides a model distinguishing between adaptive dispositions (e.g., persistence, self-efficacy, mastery orientation) and maladaptive patterns (e.g., avoidance, self-handicapping). The Motivation and Engagement Scale (MES; Martin, 2021) has been widely validated and has been used to identify student typologies at the university level (Elphinstone & Tinker, 2017). These dispositions are dynamic, emerging through students' interactions with their learning environments (Claxton & Carr, 2004), and meta-analytic work confirms the predictive power of motivational constructs for academic success and wellbeing (Howard et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2022).

Additionally, metacognitive self-regulation, defined as students' capacity for goal-setting, planning, and monitoring during learning (Pintrich et al., 1991), offers a further lens on how students manage the demands of higher education. Research has established that metacognitive self-regulation plays a mediating role between motivation and learning outcomes (Credé & Phillips, 2011; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014; Zimmerman, 2002). Theoretically, motivation provides the drive for learning, engagement represents the behaviours aligned with that drive, and metacognitive self-regulation mediates the relationship between the two (Liem & Martin, 2012). Drawing these constructs together, the present study conceptualises learning dispositions as the integrated orientation formed by motivation, engagement, and metacognitive self-regulation.

Wellbeing as a Narrative-Motivational Practice

Student wellbeing is now understood not merely as the absence of distress but as a dynamic, multidimensional capacity encompassing cognitive, emotional, and motivational resources (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023). Research has consistently linked wellbeing to key learning dispositions such as self-efficacy, persistence, and self-regulation (Howard et al., 2021; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014). However, beyond these behavioural and cognitive dimensions, wellbeing also operates as a narrative practice. Students' understanding of their psychological health is shaped by the stories they construct about who they are, where they have come from, and what their education means to them (McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., 2010). The capacity to narrate adversity as meaningful or transformative can serve as a powerful psychological resource. This perspective challenges approaches that treat student wellbeing as a discrete outcome or trait, suggesting instead that wellbeing is constituted through ongoing sense-making, through the integration of dispositional tendencies into evolving personal narratives.

Addressing the Gap

The literature reviewed above demonstrates the interrelationships among students' self-perceptions, motivation, and engagement with learning. However, much of this work has relied on quantitative self-concept measures and has examined students' cognitive evaluations of competence at a single point in time. Studies that have adopted narrative approaches to student identity in higher education (e.g., Ding & Curtis, 2021; Tilley, 2025) have provided rich qualitative insight into students' experiences but have not examined how narrative patterns relate to quantitatively measured learning dispositions. Meanwhile, research using quantitative dispositional measures such as the MES (e.g., Elphinstone & Tinker, 2017) has successfully identified student typologies but has not explored the identity narratives that may underpin these profiles.

The current study brings these two lines of inquiry together through a multistage mixed-methods design that combines quantitative measures of motivation, engagement, and metacognitive self-regulation with narrative interviews capturing students' broader educational life stories. This design enables exploration of how students experience and articulate motivation, challenge, and growth, and if identifiable narrative patterns can add explanatory value beyond demographic and academic variables. By foregrounding student voice and lived experience alongside psychometric measurement, it responds to calls for more student-centred approaches to higher education research (Department of Education, 2024; Foster & Francis, 2020).

Method

Design

This study employed a multistage mixed-methods design combining an explanatory sequential component (quan > QUAL) with a convergent component (QUAN + QUAL), as described by Fetters et al. (2013). The design was underpinned by a critical realist perspective (Saunders et al., 2015), which treats learning as a complex event encompassing both directly observable behaviours and underlying factors, such as personal identity, that give rise to those behaviours. Critical realism supports the integration of objective and interpretive approaches on the basis that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods alone can fully account for the multilayered nature of learning experience.

Data collection occurred over two sequential stages. Each stage included a quantitative phase (investigating learning dispositions via an online questionnaire) and a qualitative phase (investigating narrative identity through life story interviews). Stage one served as a pilot with three purposes: (a) to ensure the proposed methodology fit the study objectives, (b) to pilot test the instruments to determine whether modifications were needed, and (c) to develop an analytical framework to guide the analyses in stage two. In stage one, the quantitative instruments were assessed for internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), factor structure alignment with prior validation studies, and response completion patterns. All subscales demonstrated acceptable to high reliability, and no modifications to the instruments were required. The interview protocol was assessed for clarity, relevance to university-aged participants, and the capacity to elicit meaningful narrative content. No issues emerged, and the same protocol was used in stage two.

After the second stage, a mixed phase integrated both data strands. The number of coded references for each narrative theme was summed per participant, then dichotomised using a median split into low and high categories, creating quantitative indicators suitable for inclusion in predictive models (Fetters et al., 2013). This transformation was necessary to facilitate a direct comparison of predictive models incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, which could only be achieved by expressing both data strands in a common format.

Participants

Data were collected in Semester 2, 2021 (stage one) and Semester 1, 2022 (stage two) at a university in Melbourne, Australia. Stage one included 313 participants in the quantitative phase and 11 in the qualitative phase. Stage two included 172 quantitative and 15 qualitative participants, resulting in a total sample of 485 (quantitative) and 26 (qualitative). The quantitative sample was diverse in educational background: 38.5% had completed high school as their highest prior qualification, while 26.8% held a diploma or advanced diploma. The majority were enrolled in the School of Health Sciences (57.1%) or in the School of Social Sciences, Media, Film and Education (28.0%). Over half studied online only (54.2%), with 39.0% in blended mode. Most participants were employed, with 41.3% working part time and 24.6% working full time.

Materials

Learning dispositions. Motivation and engagement were assessed using Martin's MES (2021), which captures adaptive dimensions (self-efficacy, valuing, learning focus, persistence, planning, task management) and maladaptive dimensions (anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control, self-sabotage, disengagement). The MES was selected for several reasons. First, its conceptualisation is grounded in multiple psychological theories, including Bandura's social cognitive theory and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, providing a comprehensive cognitive-behavioural framework for understanding motivation and engagement (Liem & Martin, 2012). Second, the MES has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across educational levels, including university settings (Martin, 2009). Third, Elphinstone and Tinker (2017) demonstrated that the MES can be used effectively to identify student typologies at the university level, which was central to the clustering approach adopted in this study. Self-regulation was assessed using the metacognitive self-regulation subscale from Pintrich's Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich et al., 1991), which has a strong theoretical foundation and broad empirical support (Credé & Phillips, 2011). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*).

Narrative identity. The Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2007) is a structured protocol prompting participants to narrate their life stories across general and domain-specific contexts (Adler et al., 2016). Participants conceptualised their life as a book with chapters and described key scenes, such as high points, low points, turning points, and challenges. Select prompts were modified to enhance relevance for university-aged participants.

Procedure

First-year psychology students were invited to participate in exchange for course credit through the university's research experience program. In stage two, additional participants were recruited through on-campus posters and email invitations to enhance sample diversity. The study was conducted with ethics approval (20215791-8159), and all students were provided with informed consent forms and assured of confidentiality. After completing the online questionnaire, participants could opt in to the life story interview. Interview participants were purposively sampled based on cluster analysis results. Interviews were conducted online, audio recorded, and transcribed. All participant names used in the reporting of qualitative findings are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

The qualitative sample ($N = 26$) reflected the purposive sampling strategy adopted in the study, where interview participants were selected based on their cluster membership to ensure representation across dispositional profiles. This approach prioritised depth over breadth, consistent with the explanatory sequential design in which the qualitative phase was intended to provide insight into the quantitative findings rather than to achieve generalisability on its own. Qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis procedure: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. In stage one, an inductive approach was used to generate themes from the data without a pre-existing coding frame. The themes identified in stage one were then adopted as a deductive coding framework for stage two. To ensure the credibility of the analysis, several strategies recommended by Noble and Smith (2015) were embedded throughout the research process: maintaining reflexive awareness of the researcher's own biases and assumptions, keeping detailed records of analytical decisions, and ensuring transparency in the coding process. Cultural context was considered throughout the narrative analysis by attending to participants' references to cultural, familial, and socioeconomic backgrounds as part of the broader narrative context that shaped their identity and learning experiences, rather than bracketing these factors from the analysis.

Results

Quantitative Phase: Learning Dispositions

Descriptive statistics were computed across 12 learning disposition factors, with all subscales demonstrating acceptable to high internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from .72 to .88). A k-means cluster analysis using standardised scores identified a three-cluster solution (Table 1). The clusters represented students with (1) low levels of motivation, engagement, and self-regulation combined with high maladaptive dispositions ($n = 139$; 28.7%); (2) moderate levels of both adaptive and maladaptive dispositions ($n = 173$; 35.6%); and (3) high motivation, engagement, and self-regulation alongside low maladaptive dispositions ($n = 173$; 35.6%).

Table 1*Mean (SD) of Learning Disposition Factors Across Three Clusters*

Factors	Cluster 1 (n = 139)	Cluster 2 (n = 173)	Cluster 3 (n = 173)
Adaptive motivation			
Self-efficacy	77.60 (11.90)	85.67 (8.73)	92.08 (7.66)
Valuing	77.88 (11.43)	87.47 (7.83)	90.88 (7.25)
Learning focus	82.63 (11.60)	91.33 (7.85)	94.09 (6.94)
Adaptive engagement			
Planning	53.77 (14.82)	70.27 (13.15)	76.31 (13.23)
Task management	66.50 (16.22)	77.25 (13.62)	84.97 (13.13)
Persistence	66.93 (12.80)	80.35 (9.37)	88.33 (9.11)
Maladaptive motivation			
Anxiety	79.26 (15.59)	82.43 (11.33)	65.54 (18.44)
Failure avoidance	55.82 (17.75)	48.23 (17.11)	27.54 (13.60)
Uncertain control	63.27 (16.65)	56.30 (15.97)	35.13 (12.24)
Maladaptive engagement			
Self-sabotage	57.87 (18.83)	38.73 (16.40)	25.64 (11.02)
Disengagement	58.65 (15.83)	37.45 (13.86)	27.48 (11.80)
Self-regulation			
Metacognitive self-regulation	52.39 (11.41)	63.93 (9.09)	70.97 (11.92)

Note. N = 485.

A one-way MANOVA confirmed that cluster differences were statistically significant, $F(1, 159) = 58.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .82$. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs, using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha of .004, were all significant at $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons showed that each cluster significantly differed from the others across all dimensions, with one exception: Clusters 1 and 2 did not significantly differ on Anxiety. Bivariate correlations confirmed coherent structural patterns: adaptive motivation factors were positively associated with adaptive engagement and self-regulation, while maladaptive motivational traits (uncertain control, failure avoidance) were negatively correlated with adaptive constructs and positively correlated with disengagement and self-sabotage.

Qualitative Phase: Narrative Identity

The qualitative phase examined the narratives students constructed about their educational journeys. Through narrative thematic analysis, two overarching domains emerged: *Challenges* and *Positive Reinforcements* (Table 2). All participant names are pseudonyms.

Table 2*Narrative Themes by Cluster Membership*

Themes	Cluster 1 (<i>n</i> = 4)	Cluster 2 (<i>n</i> = 12)	Cluster 3 (<i>n</i> = 10)
Challenges			
Mental health	2	5	6
Identity struggle	1	5	2
Lack of support	3	3	4
Change and instability	2	5	3
Positive Reinforcements			
Adaptive attitudes	2	7	8
Supportive relationships	2	7	6
Role models	2	1	5
Recognition and validation	2	3	2

Note. *N* = 26. Cluster 1: low motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. Cluster 2: moderate motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. Cluster 3: high motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. Values represent the number of participants within each cluster for whom the theme was identified.

Mental health emerged as a recurring thread across all clusters, shaping both motivation and engagement. Ethan (Cluster 3) reflected on the uncertainty and diminished enjoyment he experienced during the pandemic: “It just felt like nothing was going to be right for me ... it was hard for me to enjoy things.” James (Cluster 2) described how mental health difficulties had interrupted his schooling: “Not long after that, I decided to drop out of grade 12.”

Identity struggle was a central theme, with students describing university as a space to explore and negotiate self-identity. Emily (Cluster 3) expressed an ongoing tension between ambition and authenticity: “How do I balance all this ambition and desire for growth ... but not at the cost of my heart, my soul, my creativity?” Lucas (Cluster 2) described university as a means of identity formation: “It was very much about forming that identity of myself or even just trying to find that identity.”

A **lack of support** was described by participants across all three clusters. Sophia (Cluster 1) described frustration at how her dyslexia had been overlooked: “I don’t think they understood that I had issues with reading.” William (Cluster 3) highlighted how inconsistent parental guidance created self-doubt: “We’d get told off for not studying, but I didn’t even know how to really study.” **Change and instability**, including family conflict and relocation, also disrupted students’ capacity to engage, particularly during critical educational periods. Liam (Cluster 1) reflected, “I was at the centre of so many adult conflicts that I didn’t understand at the time.”

Despite these challenges, students’ narratives revealed significant sources of resilience. **Adaptive attitudes**, including persistence, optimism, and self-efficacy, were most prevalent among students in Cluster 3. Henry (Cluster 3) described a determined mindset: “Stick to it ... something will give in your direction.” **Supportive relationships** from family, peers, and teachers played a crucial enabling role. Ethan (Cluster 3) credited specific teachers with sustaining his academic engagement: “A couple of really good teachers ... gave me some specific help that stuck with me.” Notably, the absence of **role models** sometimes motivated students to pursue higher education. Eva (Cluster 3) described wanting to model educational aspiration for her child: “If I’m studying, I can take the lead on that and be a role model.”

Recognition and validation emerged as particularly valued, especially among mature-age students and career changers. Sarah (Cluster 2), an educator herself, emphasised the importance of seeing students as individuals: “They want to know that they’re not just a number ... they’re actually human beings.” These accounts were particularly common among participants who had returned to education after time in the workforce.

Mixed Phase

The mixed phase ($N = 26$) examined whether narrative identity variables improved the prediction of learning disposition profiles beyond demographic and academic factors. To prepare the qualitative data, the number of coded references for each sub-theme was summed per participant. Based on a median split, participants were categorised as either “low” or “high” on each narrative identity variable (Challenges and Positive Reinforcements). Multinomial logistic regressions were then conducted with cluster membership as the dependent variable. Model 1 included demographic characteristics (age, gender, socioeconomic status [SES]) and past academic performance (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank [ATAR]). Whilst the model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(8) = 13.12, p = .001$, only age emerged as the significant predictor. Model 1 explained 45.6% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2) and correctly classified 53.8% of cases.

In contrast, Model 2 added the narrative identity variables. It showed substantially improved performance: $\chi^2(6) = 26.87, p < .001$. In this model, age ($p < .001$), Positive Reinforcements ($p = .006$), and Challenges ($p = .033$) were all significant predictors. Model 2 explained 74.2% of the variance and correctly classified 76.9% of cases, an increase of 28.6% in explained variance and 23.1% in classification accuracy from Model 1.

Discussion

This study explored how university students’ learning dispositions are shaped by their narrative identities and the broader psychological processes underpinning their educational journeys. Three key insights emerged. First, how students construct and reconcile their identity, particularly through themes of agency, coherence, and resilience, is central to their learning dispositions. Students who articulated more agentic and coherent narratives about their educational experiences tended to display stronger adaptive dispositions, consistent with evidence linking narrative coherence to wellbeing (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2010). Those in higher-adaptive clusters reflected on their experiences through themes of growth and purpose, while students in lower-adaptive clusters recounted more fragmented or unresolved stories, often marked by identity uncertainty or lack of control.

The cluster patterns revealed important nuance in this relationship. Notably, Clusters 1 and 2 did not significantly differ on the Anxiety factor, despite differing on all other dimensions. This suggests that anxiety may be a shared experience across dispositional profiles rather than a distinguishing characteristic, a finding that aligns with the broader literature on the prevalence of anxiety among university students (Baik & Larcombe, 2023; Orygen, 2020). What appeared to differentiate these clusters was not the presence of anxiety itself, but how students narrated and responded to it. Cluster 2 students, while reporting moderate adaptive dispositions, narrated the highest proportion of challenges of any group, with 91.7% categorised as “high” on the Challenges variable. Yet they also described supportive relationships and adaptive attitudes that appeared to buffer the impact of adversity. This pattern suggests that the stories students construct around their difficulties, and the relational and psychological resources on which they draw, may matter as much as the difficulties themselves.

Second, mental health challenges were a recurring theme, associated with disruptions in motivation, engagement, and persistence. This reinforces research on the reciprocal relationship between wellbeing and learning (Baik et al., 2019; Brooker & Vu, 2020), while providing a more granular, student-centred account of how psychological distress unfolds in academic settings. The emotional complexity of students’ journeys was striking, with many narrating experiences of anxiety, depression, or burnout as central threads that shaped how they approached learning. Engagement and persistence are also key facets of emotional life (Howard et al., 2021), with wellbeing actively influencing students’ capacity to sustain motivation and maintain focus. Importantly, this was evident across all three clusters, challenging the assumption that students with high adaptive dispositions are immune to psychological distress. Rather, the narratives suggest that these students had access to meaning-making strategies, often developed through prior adversity, that enabled them to integrate difficult experiences into a broader narrative of growth.

Third, metacognitive self-regulation emerged as a protective factor. Students with higher self-regulation managed challenges more effectively and sustained engagement over time, consistent with research positioning self-regulation as a cyclical, adaptive process (Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014; Zimmerman, 2002). These capacities were embedded in students’ personal narratives: self-regulated students frequently reframed setbacks as temporary or instructive, drawing on internal narratives of growth to maintain perspective (Adler et al., 2016). This narrative reframing appeared especially crucial during periods of adversity. The connection between self-regulation and narrative capacity is theoretically significant. Research has established that self-regulation mediates the relationship between motivation and learning outcomes (Credé & Phillips, 2011; Pintrich &

De Groot, 1990). The present findings suggest that metacognitive skills do not function in isolation but are sustained and organised through the broader identity narratives that students construct about themselves as learners (McAdams, 2001).

As outlined in the literature review, a substantial body of research has examined the relationships between self-concept, motivation, and self-regulation using quantitative measures (e.g., Gavín-Chocano et al., 2024; Lee, 2022; Lohbeck & Moschner, 2022; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). The present study builds on this work by examining how these constructs co-occur in students' lived experience through the lens of narrative identity. The mixed-phase findings demonstrate this clearly, with narrative identity variables improving the prediction of learning disposition profiles, increasing explained variance from 45.6% to 74.2% and classification accuracy from 53.8% to 76.9%. This pattern is consistent with longitudinal evidence that narrative identity processes during the transition to university are related to trajectories of life satisfaction and mental health (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020). The finding suggests that narrative identity functions not simply as an outcome or correlate of learning dispositions, but as an organising lens through which students make sense of their challenges, aspirations, and progress (McAdams, 2001). It is in these internal stories that we glimpse how motivation is sustained, how self-efficacy is built, and how academic direction is restored after disruption. Building on Elphinstone and Tinker's (2017) use of dispositional profiles to identify student typologies, the present findings suggest that these profiles are shaped by the stories students construct about their educational journeys.

Implications for Practice

These findings carry important implications for how institutions design and deliver student support. If narrative identity provides a meaningful framework through which students understand and engage with learning, then support services must extend beyond surface-level interventions targeting skills or behaviours alone (Bowden et al., 2021; Foster & Francis, 2020). Effective support should also attend to how students make sense of their experiences and develop a coherent sense of self as learners.

There are several practical applications. First, guided reflective activities, narrative workshops, and peer storytelling forums could offer structured spaces for students to process challenges, reframe setbacks, and construct adaptive narratives about their learning. For instance, first-year experience programs might incorporate facilitated reflective journaling, in which students revisit and reinterpret critical educational moments, or small-group narrative exercises, in which students share and receive feedback on their educational stories. Peer mentoring programs could be designed around structured storytelling, pairing students in different stages of their degrees to foster intergenerational narrative exchange. Research has shown that reflective journal writing can support self-discovery, metacognitive skill development, and deeper engagement with learning (e.g., Sudirman et al., 2021). Peer mentoring has also been found to benefit student engagement, sense of belonging, and retention, particularly during the transition to university (e.g., Gehreke et al., 2024; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2021). These activities could be embedded into coursework and orientation programs or supported through academic advising and counselling services. In online and blended environments, digital storytelling platforms and asynchronous reflective forums may offer scalable alternatives to face-to-face narrative activities, enabling students who study remotely to participate in identity-supportive practices.

Second, the finding that mental health challenges recurred across all three clusters, actively shaping students' capacity to sustain motivation and engagement, underscores the importance of equipping students with the skills to recognise and respond to mental health difficulties, both in peers and in their own lives. Programs that build peer mental health literacy in tertiary settings, such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) for Tertiary Students (Mental Health First Aid Australia, n.d.), are one means of developing these skills (Wilson et al., 2026). Evaluations of MHFA training have reported gains in recognition of mental health problems, confidence to provide initial support, and help-seeking intentions (Ashoorian et al., 2019; Bond et al., 2015; Carpini et al., 2021). Because psychological distress in the present study was not confined to students with maladaptive dispositions, skills of this kind could be meaningfully developed across the student population rather than targeted only at those considered at risk. Such programs address the recognition-and-response dimension of student wellbeing at the point of need, operating at a different level from the narrative-informed practices outlined above. Institutions that resource both kinds of initiative may be better positioned to support both immediate wellbeing and the longer-term meaning-making processes that sustain academic engagement.

Third, the findings align with a growing body of research demonstrating that the quality of staff–student relationships plays a significant role in student wellbeing and engagement (Baik et al., 2019; Baik & Larcombe, 2023; Riva et al., 2020). The

qualitative data in this study reinforced this. Students valued recognition and validation highly, and relational interactions with educators featured prominently in their stories of both challenge and growth. The present findings indicate that these interactions were not only valued in general terms but were also specifically connected to students' narrative identity work. Students described educators who recognised them as whole persons, not just as academic performers, as playing a meaningful role in sustaining their engagement. Professional development programs that introduce educators to the principles of narrative-informed practice could complement existing pedagogical training by helping staff recognise and respond to the identity dimensions of students' experiences.

Taken together, these implications reframe learning dispositions not as fixed individual traits but as dynamic, context-sensitive processes shaped through experience and interpretation. The Australian Universities Accord has called for systemic reform to better support student wellbeing and equity (Department of Education, 2024). Narrative-informed approaches offer a concrete, evidence-based pathway to translate policy aspirations into practice, particularly for students navigating psychological distress or academic uncertainty with limited external resources. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that implementation is not without challenges. The relational and time-intensive nature of narrative-based practices sits in tension with the increasing pressures of workload, casualisation, and performance metrics that characterise contemporary higher education (McCarthy et al., 2017). Institutional capacity and resourcing will shape the extent to which such support can be embedded at scale, and further research is needed into how these approaches can be delivered sustainably within existing structures.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be noted. The qualitative and mixed-phase samples were small, and the integrated findings should be interpreted as exploratory. Replication with larger samples is warranted to confirm the patterns observed. The study was conducted at a single Australian university with a sample concentrated in health and social science disciplines, which may limit generalisability. The reliance on self-report measures and cross-sectional data precludes causal conclusions. Additionally, the use of a median split to dichotomise the narrative identity variables, while necessary given the sample size, may have obscured more nuanced relationships between narrative patterns and dispositional profiles. A further consideration is that participants who volunteered for life story interviews may have been more reflective or motivated than the broader student population, introducing potential self-selection bias that should be considered when interpreting the qualitative and mixed-phase findings.

Several directions for future research follow from these findings and limitations. The finding that Clusters 1 and 2 did not significantly differ on the Anxiety factor, despite differing on all other dimensions, warrants further investigation. Studies could examine whether narrative patterns around anxiety, such as how students narrate and respond to anxiety experiences, differentiate students who maintain engagement from those who disengage. Longitudinal designs with larger qualitative samples would allow examination of how narrative identity and learning dispositions evolve and interact over time. Intervention studies could also test whether narrative-based interventions produce measurable changes in students' dispositional profiles and wellbeing outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings in this study challenge static or purely skills-based models of student engagement. Instead, they support a dynamic perspective in which meaning-making, identity, and experience interact to influence motivation, engagement, and self-regulation. For institutional practice, this perspective encourages a shift towards more holistic and student-centred models of support, ones that recognise the power of narrative, identity, and psychological resilience in shaping students' academic engagement and success.

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