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Abstract

While no major change in relation to student attrition and retention data has been recorded over the last 20 years, the increasingly neoliberal agenda imposed on Australian higher education institutions has led to increased scrutiny around such data. In this case study, we explore discourses of attrition and retention to better understand the unique needs of students, and influences of targeted student support programs, as they transition to a regional higher education learning environment. We applied a mixed methods approach via a poststructuralist lens to identify frequency of nodes in relation to dimensions of the Kahu (2013) *conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences* model and present staff (n=6) and student (n=7) perceptions about the tangible value of knowledge, engagement, participation, and reportable outcomes of student support programs. Our findings indicate that staff tend to view student support programs from deficit discourses, whereas students view them as empowering.

Introduction

The focus of increasing student retention by mitigating attrition factors has become a key strategic item for many higher education institutions. Academic literature highlights that student retention has become a foregrounded issue for institutional governance internationally because of neoliberal ideologies that enable government funding to be withdrawn increasingly, students to be constructed as both consumers and the problem, and a juxtaposition between open-access and stricter enrolment conditions to exist (Curran, 2017; Jones, Bonnano, & Scouller, 2001; Lau, 2003). Tinto (2006) indicates however, that while “student retention has become a big business for researchers, educators, and entrepreneurs alike” (p. 2), there has been no major change, upwards or downwards, in student retention rates internationally over the past twenty years. This implies that either student attrition has always, and always will be, a reality for higher education institutions due to the unique learning environments, or, that further understanding of factors leading to student attrition is to be addressed. In this paper, we explore discourses of attrition and retention to better understand the unique needs of students, and influences of targeted student support programs (SSPs), as they transition to the higher education learning environment. We draw upon Kahu’s (2013) *conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences* (for brevity, hereafter referred to as the Kahu model) to present a case study that foregrounds staff and student voices to evaluate the effectiveness of a specific SSP offered to first year students at a regional Victorian university in Australia.

Literature

Scholarly interest in student retention and attrition has increased over the past two decades as neoliberal agendas have permeated higher education practices progressively. The literature

Evaluating SSPs on retention and success

explored as part of this case study, tends to centre around four key themes; theories of attrition, the role of programs to support transition to higher education, the role of mentoring, and impacts on and of staffing. In these discussions, students are viewed through deficit discourses overarchingly, yet at the same time, constructed as consumers of a particular product (Rumble, 2000). This creates a contested space where students' personal circumstances and academic abilities are understood as fixed concepts preventing retention, yet at the same time, ideas of consumerism position them as active agents in their own academic journeys. Such ideologies reduce institutional responsibility to address student retention / attrition. Rather, the success or failure of a student to transition / integration into the higher education culture is one dependent purely on them.

Although figures relating to student retention have not changed substantially since Tinto's (2006) report, maintaining retention by addressing attrition factors has emerged as an increasing area of interest for university governance operating within neoliberal discourses. There is a consensus that learning in higher education environments is a unique experience of higher order thinking, where integration into the social and academic culture is essential for student transition (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Zepke, 2015). In such discourses, student success is considered dependent on the individual's ability to navigate personal circumstances so they can assimilate successfully into normative practices of the university; these being attendance at lectures / tutorials / workshops, familiarisation with learning management systems, and content specific courses of knowledge for example. Wingate (2007) indicates that "two thirds of withdrawals happen during or at the end of the first year" (p. 391) of study due to the "lack of preparation for and understanding of the type of learning that is required" (p. 392). The literature indicates strongly however that factors relating to attrition are multi-faceted; they circulate around both personal circumstances and university culture (Bettlinger et al, 2013; Lau, 2003; Mellor, Brooks, Gray & Jordan, 2015).

While some students exit higher education study due to personal circumstances beyond institutional control, such as “finances, poor student-institution fit, changing goals, [others withdraw] because the institution has failed to create an environment conducive to the learning and educational needs” (Lau, 2003, p. 127). Such factors of attrition continue to be supported by current literature (see Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich, & Dobson, 2014; Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017; Mellor et al., 2015).

The notion of wellbeing as it pertains to students’ self-concept and confidence in their academic abilities is the main tenant identified upon which university transition programs ought to focus. This is because as Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, and Pohlert (2004) emphasise, students with “high levels of self-esteem are better able to adjust [to university life] both socially and academically” (p. 257); factors identified as important for university commitment. Yet, the bulk of literature in this field calls for further research of retention and attrition to be conducted from the student perspective. Understanding “the sum of all pressures a student has in their life, including university, as a critical factor influencing student engagement” (Kahu, 2003, p. 767), from the student perspective is particularly pertinent to speaking back to neoliberal discourses that seek to shift concepts of success at university as the sole responsibility of students.

The main goal of SSPs, identified by a range of studies (see for example, Bettinger, et al, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Grant-Vallone et al, 2004; Lau, 2003; Mellor et al, 2015), is to position students in a situated learning environment where increased academic performance is supported via social development. Working with students’ to develop their social capacity during transition to a new and unique learning environment occurs primarily through the provision of services such as mentoring, tutoring, and academic monitoring (Bettinger et al, 2013). The purpose of these services is to support students in multiple ways; prepare them for courses, improve study skills, and counselling to identify additional

academic resources that may be required. Yet, Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin, and Toler Williams (1999) argue that learning about, and integration into, the social environment of the learning culture occurs most successfully via communities of social networks. Often referred to as communities of practice (COP) within the literature, Walsh, Larsen, and Parry (2009) argue that formal or informal membership to a COP is a demonstrated requisite to academic success, a position supported in current literature (see Curran, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016; Todorova, 2017). Through the lens of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, students' with an insecure sense of safety and belonging within the learning environment, will be challenged to accomplish academic tasks with a positive sense of self-esteem / self-actualisation (Freitas & Leonard, 2011). The importance of facilitating students' academic and social development simultaneously is evidenced by Mellor et al (2015) who argue that "metacognitive awareness leads to an increase in self-regulated learning activities" (p. 57), with a reportable "10% lower attrition rate" (p. 56) across the cohort.

When transition is viewed as a process of becoming, rather than induction or development, fixed notions of consumerism touted by neoliberal discourses are challenged. Gale and Parker (2014) argue that the provision of SSPs as a linear induction process managed by institutions fails to expose students' to the hidden curriculum, and hinders development of their identity as critical thinkers (Gale & Parker, 2014). Similarly, developmental transition programs "place significant onus on students' regarding their commitment and motivation to study" (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 739) and continue to construct them both as the problem and solution to increasing retention. It enables institutions to negate responsibility for addressing student attrition by legitimising provision of remedial forms of support to address student deficits (Bettinger et al, 2013; Kift & Nelson, 2005), ignore impacts of ideological inequalities embedded within institutional culture (Jury et al, 2017; Rumble, 2000; Zepke, 2015), and withdraw long term funding identified as essential

(Jones et al., 2001; Korinek et al, 1999; Tinto, 2006). Problematising student retention as a process of becoming rather, works with the fluidity and multiplicities of student experiences to “transform teaching practices, curriculum, and institutions to affirm student cultural capital” (Zepke and Leach, 2005, p. 54, cited in Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 746). While flexible, responsive, and targeted student driven SSPs is suggested as a way forward (Crawford et al., 2015), current university transition practices take up the notion of mentoring as a best practice model. In these discourses, ideas about students shift from spaces of deficit to collaboration.

Mentoring as a process that involves one experienced student providing support to a beginning student in the higher education space is identified as one successful practice of transition. Moving beyond notions of remedial support, academic literature (see Korinek et al, 1999; Masika & Jones, 2016; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Walsh et al, 2009) identifies strongly the positive social emotional benefits gained from quality peer relationships developed during transitional mentoring program as important to “predicting the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students” (Altermatt, 2016, p. 11). Mentoring program as identified by Grant-Vallone et al (2004) are “particularly important for traditionally under-represented [sic] students” (p. 268), in that “relationships built on campus are more critical [to academic success] than supportive families” (p. 269). Acquisition of increased social emotional well-being developed in situ with “confidence affirming experiences” (Grant-Vallone et al, 2004, p. 146) of mentorship has a demonstrated impact on increased academic success and student retention (Masika & Jones, 2016; Mellor et al, 2015; Todorova, 2017).

The role of the experienced student in the mentoring relationship is essential to modelling notions of persistence and vision for successful academic outcomes. Establishing an emotional safety network of encouragement and support via dimensions of facilitator relationships, information transference, and personal development as Nora and Crisp (2007)

identify, is a crucial psychological factor that promotes student persistence with academic study. Whether students study face-to-face, in a blended mode, or fully online, facilitated membership to a peer community of practice is closely associated with increased and sustained academic engagement because “social participation is the bedrock of learning” (Masika & Jones, 2016, p. 139). In the neoliberal discourses circulating around the higher education space though, the notion of mentorship may be seen as just another avenue through which deficit discourses of student attrition and retention persist. It shifts the responsibility of academic success away slightly from the individual student to implicate characteristics, experiences, and motivations of the wider student body as culpable. In doing so, once again the institution, and by extension its employees, are released from any duty to support learning environments conducive to student success outcomes. This is highlighted specifically by Rumble (2000) who reported “the generally woeful lack of knowledge [understood by individual teachers] about the effective of student support programs” (p. 220).

The literature suggests that students and teachers may push back against neoliberal discourses taken up by higher education institutions via engagement with partnerships of learning. The notion of students as partners is not a recent development. Curran (2017) highlights that “the idea of a university with a community of learners (students and staff) working together to advance scholarship was the vision put forward by Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1810” (p. 2). Since then, the student partnership paradigm has come to encompass notions of improved citizenship for employability, enhanced learning and teaching experiences leading to better engagement, and increased metacognitive development of identity (Curran, 2017). Yet, in order for partnerships of learning to occur, Jones et al (2001) argue that staff must be interested firstly, and supported secondly, to develop their own pedagogical practices. Unless staff have an understanding of the diverse and complex experiences of student cohorts entering the higher education space, “holistic, student-centred

and inclusive approaches to learning and learning” (Crawford et al, 2015, p. 7) that address factors of attrition is not possible.

While staff may be interested genuinely in improving their own pedagogical practices for student success outcomes, institutional funding restrictions and increased workload pressures act as barriers to engagement (Curran, 2017; Jones et al 2001; Wingate, 2007; Zepke, 2015). This is despite Curran (2017) highlighting that staff commitment to ensuring student-centred partnerships of learning acts as a dual support framework for personal development and enhanced learning experiences. Developing partnerships of learning is inhibited further as technological advancements outstrip academic teachers’ knowledge, competence, and capacity to integrate multimedia technology in ways that “enrich and complement classroom teaching and learning” (Lau, 2003, p. 132). Yet, Crawford et al (2015) argue that such barriers should not be accepted as legitimate reasons for situating responsibility of attrition and retention on student cohorts solely. In these discussions, discourses of attrition and retention shift to one centred on engagement where recognition of “the importance of facilitating personal growth for both staff and students in order that they can engage effectively, rather than just focusing on what staff can do to make students engage” (Curran, 2017, p. 10).

Through this analysis of the scholarly literature, we have identified the different discourses moving throughout and around notions of student attrition and retention. It is clear that these different discourses are taken up, or backgrounded, as investigations seek to identify the reasons for student attrition and retention. It would appear that understanding of what constitutes student retention shifts from a number of perspectives at the institutional level, through a success paradigm from the staffing perspective, to wellbeing aspects from the student perspective. As studies of program makeup, the role of student mentors, and the role of staffing inform these discussions, it becomes clear that there is not one single identifiable

standalone factor that will improve student attrition and retention rates magically. It illuminates the persistent lack of consensus around the meaning and definition of engagement, success, and retention. Perhaps this could be reflective that the majority of published scholarly literature takes issue with attrition, retention, and success from a detached researchers' positioning where staff and student (see Curran, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016; Todorova, 2017; Walsh et al, 2009) voices contributing qualitatively to the complexity of these discourses are generally lacking. This is interesting considering the higher education sector considers engagement as an essential marker of good teaching practice and student success outcomes. Kahu (2013) however, offers up the conceptual framework as an avenue through which to explore structural, psychosocial, and personal factors influencing student engagement at university. The model seeks to champion notions of attrition and retention away from deficit discourses to identify reasons concerned with the institution, staffing, and students holistically.

Project Context

The data presented in this paper was collected as part of Federation University Australia's (FedUni) contribution to the *Shaping the 21st Century student experience at regional universities* Office of Learning and Teaching national research project (Nelson, Readman, & Stoodley, 2018). The focus of the project was to explore the diverse experiences of undergraduate student populations enrolled at regional universities and to identify how comparable and equitable outcomes for students may be achieved, compared with metropolitan cohorts. An anticipated objective of the comprehensive analysis of student experiences at regional universities was to inform and shape future higher education policy and practice. This was enacted by analysing data within the scope of Kahu's (2013) model to

student engagement to “discover new information, disparities, and themes” (Nelson et al., 2018). Kahu (2013) model as an avenue through which researcher’s may capture the complexity of factors influencing student retention and success within higher education institutions. Kahu (2013) argues that by reframing understandings of student engagement away from individual deficit discourses to one embedded within sociocultural contexts, the “unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer” (p. 766). In doing so, the importance of capturing individual student perspective via evidence-based methodologies for richer and deeper understandings of student experiences are developed.

FedUni is a multi-campus, regionally focused, tertiary education provider in Victoria, Australia, and a member of the Regional Universities Network (RUN). Over 29% of students come from a low socioeconomic status families and ‘are often first-in-family [meaning that] parents may not be supportive, or just don’t get [the] concept of what university is [and] how it works’ (Devlin & McKay, 2017, p. 27). Association with lower SES families however does not mean that students are lacking, deficient, or deemed to fail due to internal shortcomings. Rather, Devlin and McKay (2016) argue that students from these backgrounds are often “hardworking, high achieving, and determined to succeed” (p. 359). The most current data in 2013 indicates that just over a quarter of students withdrew from commencing study at FedUni, with the other three quarters maintaining enrollment in study and achieving success (Department of Education and Training, 2015). This is complimented with data available in 2018, indicating that FedUni has a 5/5 star student satisfaction ranking for student support (Australian Education Network, 2018, “Federation University (FEDUNI) Rankings”, Australian Rankings, para 2). Rather than view student engagement via a solitary lens, the multimodal perspective offered up by Kahu (2013) provides us with an avenue through which to explore how SSPs offered at FedUni address “the needs of students, to enhance the student experience, and to improve educational outcomes” (p. 769).

According to the 2017 *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching* (QILT) Report (n.d), students completing the 2016-2017 University Experience Survey (n=2865), report 78.8% satisfaction with the degree of student supports offered across FedUni; 5.6% above the national average. To support transition into university life, FedUni provides centrally administered SSPs, via eight different student-focused programs delivered via the Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP) designed to assist students prepare for study (FedReady¹), develop communities of support (Mentors, PASS, ASK Service, Student blog), and support academic learning (Online Tutoring, Learning Skills advisors, SWOTVAC Study day). It is beyond the scope of this manuscript to explore the makeup of these programs in their entirety. However, the ultimate outcome of these programs is to improve student retention and success outcomes by focusing on creating positive student experiences. A key point of difference to the delivery of FedUni's SSPs, is the employment of students as leaders and facilitators within these many of these programs.

Research Methods

Data was generated via semi structured individual interviews. The interview protocol was validated with students who are current Student Leaders within several SSPs. These students were excluded as potential participants for this research project. Each interview took place at a mutually agreeable location and took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by Smart Docs (<https://www.smartdocstranscriptionservices.com.au/>).

¹ A 5-day program designed specifically to support 'students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, first in family student cohorts and those who have minimal experience with higher education' (Fotinos & Sabo, 2018, p. 86)

In order to qualify for selection, students needed to be able to demonstrate active involvement in one or more SSPs during the past 12 months. This qualification was considered essential to ensure that participants could contribute deeper understandings of transition processes from student to student academic leader based on lived experiences of their participation with a FedUni SSP. Invitations to participate were disseminated via recruitment methods of posters around the Mt Helen or Gippsland campuses, and institutional wide electronic messages. Student participants were offered a \$50 movie voucher in appreciation of their time. Student interviews focused on identifying motivating factors and capturing the impact of individual experiences throughout engagement with FedUni SSPs. The interviews also sought to identify key factors of SSPs conducive to creating positive student experiences. Staff who have engaged within one or more of these programs were invited to participate via direct email. Staff interviews focused on capturing their involvement with, understanding of, and impact measures relating to FedUni SSPs. From these invitations, seven (7) student participants, and six (6) staff participants were recruited.

Data collected from interviews was uploaded and analysed using NVIVO 11 software. *Kahu Model Coding Guidelines* established as part of the *Shaping the 21st Century student experience at regional universities* research project (Nelson et al., 2018), was used to analyse data inductively. This was done by discovering codes linked to the Kahu (2013) model and identifying key ‘nodes’ against which data could be coded. The NVIVO Kahu nodes were developed as a hierarchical model with elements (*ie: structural influences / distal consequences*) organised into dimensions (*ie: university / student / academic / social*) containing multiple facets (*ie: background / culture / satisfaction / wellbeing*). Presenting nodes derived from FedUni data against the Kahu (2013) model, psychosocial influences were most frequently cited as conducive to creating positive student experiences, with distal

consequences least cited. The frequency of these nodes is presented in *Figure 1: Nodal Frequency of Interview data against Kahu (2013) model.*

Figure 1: Nodal Frequency of Interview data against Kahu (2013) model.

Interview transcripts were reviewed thoroughly and independently according to the Kahu coding guidelines employed by the *Shaping the 21st Century student experience at regional universities* research project (Nelson et al., 2018). Deductive reasoning was used to systematically code transcripts and map interview questions to domains of the Kahu (2013) model. A snapshot of this mapping is presented in *Table 1: Mapping of Student Interview questions about the FedUni Mentor Program to the Kahu (2013) Model.*

Table 1: Mapping of Student Interview questions about the FedUni Mentor Program to the Kahu (2013) Model

Kahu Model	Structural Influences	Psychosocial influences	Proximal consequences	Distal consequences
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Overarching Domain	Student	Students	Social	Social
Specific Domains	Background	Motivation Identity Emotion	Satisfaction Well-being	Personal Growth
Interview Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What motivated you to engage with this program? * Did your experience with the Mentor Program impact your capacity to increase your sense of belonging to your Program and FedUni in general? If so, how? * Did your experience with the Mentor Program affect your level of motivation towards your studies generally? If so, how? * How Did your experience with the Mentor Program make you feel? 			

Grounded thematic analysis was then applied to data generated from nodal frequency and mapping interview questions to determine cross theme case analysis (ie influences vs engagement vs consequences). Grounded thematic analysis allows for critical examination of otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions about student transition to, and during, higher education. The rigor of which lies in the integrity of situating data in relation to the lived experiences of individual human action (Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This data is presented in *Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Coding Data*.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Coding Data

Kahu Model	Structural Influence	Psychosocial influences	Student engagement	Proximal consequences	Distal consequences
Staff Themes	Culture (1)	Staff (11) Support (12) Skills (16) Workload (13) Emotion (14) Self-efficacy (18)	Interaction (25)		
Student Themes	Student background (6) Emotion (14)	Support (12) Staff (11) Motivation (15)	Interaction (25)	Belonging (21) Satisfaction (29) Wellbeing (30)	Retention (31) Personal growth (35)

Findings and Discussion

A thorough investigation of the data against the Kahu model highlighted a strong connection with several elements, dimensions and facets of the Kahu model (Kahu 2013). The most frequently coded facets [ie. 12 – Support (n=189); 11 – Staff (n=86); 14 – Emotion (n=48); 30 - Wellbeing] were located within the psychosocial influences – university, and proximal consequences – social elements / dimensions relationship respectively. The major findings indicate a differentiating perception between staff and students about the tangible value of SSPs for student outcomes. Analysis reveals also that success of the SSPs intended outcomes is strongly associated with the quality of the relationships built between student leaders / mentors and students accessing support. This indicates that while the purpose of SSPs may be to assist student transition to higher education by developing academic skills, fundamentally student retention is positively impacted as students develop a sense of belonging and safety within the culture of the university.

Perceived value of Student Support Programs (SSPs)

Our findings illustrate that staff and students alike consider SSPs valuable to supporting student transition, and by extension, retention. Staff tended to discuss the value of transition programs from within deficit discourses, whereas students tended to discuss the same from empowering discourses. Despite these differentiating perspectives, both groups of participants spoke about the psychosocial benefits gained from student participation of SSPs. Staff expressed benefits of participation from a generalist point-of-view by drawing on anecdotal evidence provided by observations and discussions with staff and students, whereas

students provided specific tangible outcomes experienced from participation and in discussion with peers.

Staff perceptions.

Staff considered the role of SSPs as assisting student transition by mitigating risk factors. The desire to address perceived attrition factors, such as disengagement, was considered important to one staff member because, “students come directly into university with very little understanding of what university culture – academic culture – was about” (Staff 2). When students are provided “with no assistance in navigating their way about the university” (Staff, 4), they “struggle more with that transition from school to uni, or from not studying for ten years to uni” (Staff, 3). Staff were more inclined to consider their position as referrer, rather than a facilitator of support. This is highlighted by the following excerpt:

Students identified as being at risk [are] usually sent an email. If they’ve got above a certain mark, then they are provided with the general study skills website for information generally to support them so that they can access themselves - that they can choose to. If they achieve results below a certain mark, then they are referred directly to learning skills adviser[s] and [we are] cc’d into it and we encourage [them] to go and access the learning supervisor because we feel that [they] will need the support (Staff, 2).

Taking this approach situates staff within predetermined neoliberal ideologies of SSPs as forms of remedial assistance designed to support academically challenged students (Altermatt, 2016; Lau, 2003). It situates responsibility for attrition on student engagement by calling into question affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of student capabilities (Kahu, 2013). According to Jury et al (2017), such practices of “university culture fuel the

school-class achievement gap and barriers faced by low SES students” (p. 33). Identifying the role of referrer in these transcriptions is not to discredit staff-identified positionality, rather it foregrounds a salient finding of the research; that of a general lack of staff awareness and training relevant to SSPs.

Interviews with staff members indicated a general awareness of supports available to students, such as counselling, appeals, student services, yet highlighted a lack of knowledge about the specific SSPs provided for FedUni students. One staff member spoke about institutional cultural factors as barriers to gaining deeper knowledge and understanding of SSPs. They said:

Workloads are quite high ... with research, you get a higher allocation [workload amendment] if you produce research outcomes, but there is nothing like that around student engagement, so it's not rewarded (Staff, 6).

Similarly, other staff members spoke about the institutional impact of sessional / casual employment and teacher development of knowledge about SSPs:

Sessional teachers who are not embedded in the university, they're coming in because of their practice expertise, and so they're not paid to attend staff meetings and those sorts of things and so they're just trying to get their heads around how to teach, how do I post something on Moodle? So, they wouldn't have the time and space to learn comprehensively about the different programs to know how to refer students to (Staff, 6)

It's the casual and the sessional staff who've really got no, because there's so much for them to learn, often that sort of thing is something that they're not aware of (Staff, 4)

Institutional cultural factors, such as workload allocation, valuing particular strategic priorities over others, and variable employment contracts, as Gale and Parker (2014) argue, continues to place “significant onus of [responsibility] for commitment and motivation to study, engagement with learning, interaction with staff and participation in out-of-class activities” (p. 739) on the student body, once again highlighting the impact of psychosocial influences (Kahu, 2013). As this is done, staff take up neoliberal discourses of student attrition to consider remedial forms of support as satisfactory for addressing retention. This ideology manifests in one staff member’s comments around supporting students’ academic capabilities at the course level, they said “thankfully we’re doing a lot more embedding [of] academic literacy now with learning skills advisers, we’re trying to again curtail a lot of those additional needs ... particularly for at risk students” (Staff, 2). Integrating social and academic development to support student transition to higher education is supported in the literature (see, Bettinger et al, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Zepke, 2015), and argued to “facilitate a smoother transition to study and [assimilation] into university life” (Crawford et al, 2015, p. 4). This is not to say that all staff ascribe to this particular neoliberal positioning, as evidenced by staff comments about better ways in which to develop awareness of SSPs and development of integrative strategies across the institution’s academic culture.

Even though staff appear to take up neoliberal discourses in their perceptions of SSPs, they also speak back to them by suggesting better processes at the university level. The staff involved in this study indicated that this ought to occur within the structural and psychosocial elements of the Kahu model (2013). Within the structural element, staff suggested that re-induction of existing staff was important because “people who have been here 10, 20, 30 years [don’t realise] things have actually changed a lot” (Staff, 1). The opportunity to “brain storm about really what can we be doing To [address] gaps in the students’ learning [using an] embedding approach” (Staff, 2) was also proposed as another strategy. An

embedded pedagogical approach that addresses student retention is supported in the literature (see Bettinger et al, 2003; Jones et al, 2001; Masika & Jones, 2016) with a call for more focus on the “theoretical and more practical [ways to] prepare students for their future carers” (Lau, 2003, p. 132). In order to do this though, Rumble (2000) argues that supporting students should be considered “an essential integral component of the teaching/learning system” (p. 223). Centred within the psychosocial element of the Kahu (2013) model, staff suggested that developing knowledge about students’ aspirations and promoting self-affirmation as a way forward. Re-framing notions of success by “talking to students on an emotional level rather than just a practical level ... [examining] the journey to get here and what [they’ve] overcome, and how [they] can use those things through the next six to 12 months” (Staff, 3) was considered important to developing students’ self-esteem and “reducing stereotype threat” (Jury et al, 2017, p. 31). Despite these suggestions, data highlighted that staff understanding of the benefits of student participation within SSPS manifested from anecdotal perspectives.

As staff spoke about student participation with SSPs, interview data indicated that understanding of SSPs manifested from discussion about the perceptions associated with student participation, rather than recorded evidence. Staff spoke about the positive outcomes of student participation with SSPs from an “anecdotal” (Staff, 1) foundation by highlighting a range of assumed benefits. They spoke about the benefits of peer mentoring in particular as a facet within the engagement element of the Kahu (2013) model, as a way of preparing for study by “facilitating learning” (staff 1), “rather than directing and teaching” (Staff, 2). The proximal and distal consequences elements of the Kahu (2013) model are foregrounded by another staff member who proposed that student participation with SSPs develops:

Awareness of the sorts of skills that they need. It gives them a cohort. They develop some friendships [and] familiarity with the campus. We’ve said

several years now, that every student that does FedReady, we notice how much more comfortable they are, they're already helping the students that have come a week after them. (Staff, 5).

It is interesting to note that while staff members highlighted a range of assumed benefits emerging within different elements of the Kahu (2013) model, articulation of their role specifically in relationship with SSPs was lacking. This is not an uncommon finding though; Walsh et al (2009) report that academics are generally “unaware of the range of support services within their institutions and others regard it as not their responsibility to refer students to support services that they are aware of” (p. 418). Despite this, staff articulation of the perceived psychosocial influences developed from student participation with SSPs indicated quality leadership as a key component of any program aimed at assisting student transition, increasing retention, and addressing attrition.

Student perceptions.

Lack of knowledge about the specific role of each SSPs was highlighted also as an issue throughout student interviews. While all of the students interviewed had participated in one, or more, SSPs, of the programs they had not engaged, knowledge about the aims and intended audience was absent. Two students identified a potential reasons for this, saying:

I don't think that there's enough promotion from the university for the other programmes. They're all pretty good I think from what I've heard from my first years, but I just don't know enough about them (Student, 3).

Only because of my first year when we attended [uni] and they [staff] were spruiking it and things like that in lectures, that's the only thing I'd heard about it (Student, 5).

The need for better dissemination of programs as Kift and Nelson (2005) argue lies with the infrastructure required to support transition. They say:

Changing long serving institutional practices and curriculum renewal are both dependent on the presence of a supportive strategic infrastructure that makes visible the institution's intent for transitions, and makes available student services resources, staff development, and technologies to support departmental and academic initiatives (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p. 4).

Differential to staff interviews, students considered the role of SSPs as an empowering tool to assist transition to university, not a remedial one. Shifting the gaze of transition from deficit discourses as Gale and Parker (2014) advocate, is required to create "spaces in [higher education] institutions for diverse knowledges and ways of knowing" (p. 741) that assist students' transition better from high school to tertiary education. It indicates that as students work with structural influences such as university management, and psychosocial factors involved with learning in higher education institutions, they develop awareness of internal and external factors that support their transition.

Despite the perceived lack of SSPs promotion within the university, students interviewed within this study indicated that awareness of these programs emerged primarily from their peers. The power of peer relationships to encourage engagement with SSPs from an empowering discourse is highlighted in the following student's interview:

A friend of mine who had done a Diploma of Nursing and was doing the bridging year and a half or whatever it was to become an EN or an RN, was

here to do FedReady. She hadn't been out to uni, she was at TAFE doing the first part of it, and she rang me and she goes, 'Where are you?' And I'm like, 'At home'. And she goes, 'Come down here and come and do FedReady'. And I'm like, 'What's that?', and she goes, 'Oh, it's just like a week of workshops to get you used to being at uni'. So, I came to three days of it, and found it to be the most fantastic thing ever (Student, 1).

In this example, psychosocial influences manifesting from peer relationships is a strong motivator to engaging programs assisting transition. The capacity of such influences to encourage engagement in reality was also highlighted as another student spoke about wanting to provide better experiences within SSPs for the next generation of students. They said:

I figured that I would do the mentor programme because I didn't have a very good mentor when I first started. So that really encouraged me. I saw that the applications were open for it the next year and I thought, well may as well give it a go. I'd really like to give people a good experience especially because I have so much love for this university. I'd worked hard enough in that to be a mentor coordinator this year and I just think it's the best programme. I don't think I've heard of any other programmes like that with another university, or at least that are so good for a student to attend (Student, 3).

Peer relationships as motivators for accessing SSPs are presented in Walsh et al's (2009) study as conducive to fostering engagement due to factors of accessibility, familiarity, and specialism. They argue that "students are most likely to engage and integrate with their university through academic tutors above all other sources of institutional support" (Walsh et al, 2009, p. 417). The potential of peer relationships to illicit engagement complements the purpose of Kahu's (2013) framework as "increasing student awareness of the range of

variables within their own control, and the potential impact these factors have on their engagement and success at university” (p. 767).

The strongest theme to emerge from student interviews were the academic, social, and psychological benefits of engagement in SSPs. Student interviews indicated that academic benefits revolved around understanding “how uni works [better], because it’s been – I worked out it was 15 years since I’ve been at school” (Student, 1), and development of academic skills such as “essay writing and everything involved to – the whole breaking down of it, how to do your structure, how to reference” (Student, 2). Reported social benefits centred on feelings of connectedness, in particular the increased sense of confidence to understanding and integrating within the social network of the higher education space. As one student said:

I was always one that – you did it on your own, you didn’t tell anyone your troubles, you just put your head down and you got it done, you know. I don’t know whether – I think that was just my era and that was just how I was brought up. Big family, there was no time for complaining or perhaps somebody stopping and going ‘I can see you’re having a hard time’, it was ‘pull your socks up, get over it, get going’. And to actually to use these services is just a big step for me. And now I think they see me coming and go ‘no, not the old lady!’ No I don’t think they do. They all smile and go ‘hello!’ (Student, 2).

In addition to making “so many good friends” (Student, 3), psychological benefits from participation with SSPs included cognitive and mental health development. One student experienced a lightbulb moment that shifted their perception about higher education:

I'm sitting there in the FedReady program, day two, going, oh, I should be at work, and I should be earning money, and I should be doing this. And I'm like, now, hang on a minute, my job now is to sit here and learn, that was a big adjustment that way. FedReady helped with that because it put that perspective – it was like a dry run (Student, 1).

Another student spoke about the benefits of participation in SSPs as “very good for my health and wellbeing, because you feel connected” (Student, 2). Expressions by students about benefits gained from participation in SSPs highlights Wingate's (2007) argument that university transition programs need to move beyond *ad hoc* initiatives that “follow a remedial practice of learning support” (p. 393). Student perceptions presented here support Zepke's (2015) case that “engagement in learning impacts positively on health, employability, social relationships and self-esteem, leading to subjective feelings of both individual and social wellbeing” (p. 1312). Student responses emphasise strongly Kahu's (2003) reports that “feeling part of a learning community positively influences” (p. 767), and is an integral component, of psychosocial influences for student engagement. In similar vein to conclusions made from staff perceptions, analysis of student perceptions indicate that quality student leadership and relationships are key component of successful transition for students.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a range of limitations that frame this study. As is the nature of a case study, all of the data presented in this paper is collected from and is concerned with one institution. This resulted in a smaller sample size and raises potential limitations for generalisability. While FedUni provides transition programs aimed specifically at supporting first-in-family regional students, staff and student experiences of SSPs at metropolitan or elite institutions

may vary. FedUni offers a range of SSPs with the purpose, intended audience, and desirable outcomes different for each. While the literature supports development of SSPs “to ensure the consistent and gradual development of learning for all students” (Wingate, 2007, p. 395), it indicates also that the format of SSPs differ across higher education institutions (see Crawford et al, 2015; Jones et al, 2001; Jury et al, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016; Walsh et al, 2009). As the main indicator of FedUni SSPs success is that of high quality leadership, future research ought to explore the recruitment, training, and support offered to student peer leaders and evaluation of the impact on attrition, retention, and success.

Student participants involved in the study all had a current enrolment status. Further research exploring the impact of participation in one or more SSPs, or not, would assist with contributions to knowledge about success indicators of retention, or as Tinto (2006) explains “the tipping points” (p. 10), (see also Curran, 2017). Ongoing research about the purpose of academic support and notions of what success means for the institution, staff, and students, may provide also more evidence based arguments for the extension of SSPs beyond the quintessential transitional 1st year (see also Jury et al, 2017). Finally, as already suggested by a range of studies (see Crawford et al, 2015; Jones et al, 2001; Lau, 2003; Rumble, 2000) and identified in this project, there is a desperate need to build staff awareness of central support services offered within the university system. Future research exploring fundamental pedagogical barriers to engagement and strategies offered by, and to staff to overcome such would benefit the higher education sector greatly.

Implications and Conclusions

The increasingly neoliberal agenda imposed on Australian higher education institutions has led to increased scrutiny around student attrition and retention data. Now,

more so than ever, universities function as businesses where students are considered consumers; when these consumers are dissatisfied, or feel unsupported, they take their business elsewhere. This creates a juxtaposition between open access and stricter conditions circulating enrolment requirements into higher education institutions in Australia. Our findings in relation to staff and student engagement with, and participation in, government funded yet institutionally delivered SSPs through the Kahu's (2013) *conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences* bear important implications for understanding factors influencing student support QILT data (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, n.d). Strategically, it raises the value of knowing and understanding insights into student and staff experiences encouraged throughout the process of active engagement with institutional level SSPs.

Summarising the key findings, while staff considered the role of SSPs as remedial form of support designed to mitigate risk factors of retention and positioning students at fault, students considered SSPs as an empowering peer-to-peer learning support tool. It is apparent from the data that students require a variety of modes of interactions to foster capacity and capability building (ie. face-to-face, online, just-in-time, social connections). Both staff and students indicated that more efficient dissemination practices of SSPs within the institution could lead to better learning and teaching experiences overall; some even provided strategies that could be adopted to achieve such. Streamlined improvement in loop processes regarding student need and support offered is indicated in the data as beneficial to increasing awareness, and ultimately more efficient and timely student support. Finally, staff spoke about the personal benefits of student participation in SSPs from an anecdotal evidence, yet, students spoke more specifically about the academic, social, and psychological benefits developed from participation. Articulation of participatory outcomes emerging from SSPs across the institution may have a more positive impact on timely referral to services, student

engagement and retention. This case study demonstrates the impact that SSPS can have on student wellbeing, retention, satisfaction, motivation, and engagement in a regional university context. Strong alignment to the Kahu (2013) model identifies influences within student engagement and consequences that sit outside neoliberalist agendas and offers up areas of improvement that could benefit holistic student engagement and success with the regional university context.

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