A review of inclusive curricula, teaching, retention, achievement and progression

A report for the inclusive curricula and teaching project
Southern Cross University 2013

Southern Cross
University

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Acknowledgements

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A review of inclusive curricula, teaching, retention, achievement and progression

1.0 Introduction and Background

Inclusivity in education is interpreted in various ways both in the literature and by educational institutions. This review examines the literature on inclusive curricula and teaching as defined by Southern Cross University (SCU):

Inclusive curricula and teaching in higher education is defined as an approach to course and unit design and to teaching and learning practice which aims to improve access and successful participation of groups traditionally excluded from tertiary education.

This definition of inclusivity focusses on academic success through participation for all students irrespective of their background, culture and circumstance. It is based on the idea that to participate successfully in higher education, all students need to learn how to become a university student (Devlin, 2011) , and in the process, also how to become a member of their chosen discipline by learning its language, behaviours, and ways of doing things (Bartholomae, 1985). It is a process of 'becoming' and 'belonging' (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Such an approach to inclusivity in which one participates in a particular community with particular culture and ways, aims to achieve success through enculturation in the academic degree program, rather than through supporting specific student group in specialised or additional programs. It is premised on the idea that higher education can be made "accessible, relevant and engaging to all students" and further that when students are engaged they stay at university, achieve and progress (Thomas & May, 2010, p. 5).

The aim of this literature review is to provide an evidence base for determining SCU's framework and approach to inclusivity, engagement and success. It examines the concept of diversity and 'non-traditional' students, and provides a summary of students' views of the factors underlying success. It then identifies key factors in learning programs that have been found to make measurable impacts on student retention, achievement and progression. In so doing, it draws on research and findings from the literature on inclusive curriculum and diversity, assessment, transition, critical thinking, student self-regulation, and student achievement and progression.

2.0 'Non-traditional' students

Students who have not traditionally attended university are described and categorised in many ways. They have, for instance, been described in terms of their prior learning experiences, social status, their visa status, and the minority group to which they belong. This has resulted in various descriptions of students such as being the first in their family to attend university; coming from a 'working class' background; belonging to an Indigenous group; being 'international students' or being mature-aged with their learning 'interrupted' by periods away from formal study. Categories such as these, however,

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need to be used with care. The categories often overlap, and while these students may be under represented in the university context, they are not necessarily disadvantaged (Hockings, 2010; Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton, & Cullity, 2008).

Despite problems in categorisation, there is no doubt that across Australia, diversity in the student body is increasing. With an increase in diversity, the variety of educational experiences and backgrounds increases; the range of assumptions, beliefs and dispositions that the students bring increases; the range of personal circumstances is more varied; and there is a broader range of cultural backgrounds (Thomas & May, 2010).

Trowler and Trowler's (2010) review of the literature reveals that successful engagement at university requires students to feel like they belong and that they are a university student who deserves to be there. Many students from non-traditional backgrounds, however, can feel that they do not fit in (Devlin, 2011; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that transition which facilitates a strong sense of belonging and identity has been found to strongly correlate with educational achievement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

For non-traditional students who do transition well and achieve success, the literature notes more similarities than differences across the diversity groups (Ballantyne, Madden, & Todd, 2009; Kinnear et al., 2008). Ballantyne et al. (2009), in their study of non-traditional students' perceptions in a new regional Australian campus, observed that the students were *remarkably positive about their university experience and well-equipped to achieve at university study*" (p. 301). Over 80% of the students surveyed enjoyed their courses, liked being a student, were clear about why they came to university and liked the intellectual challenge. These students had developed a strong sense of belonging and identity, and further knew what they wanted out of the experience.

In addition to being positive, successful non-traditional students have reported the types of factors that they believe contribute to their academic success. These factors are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Key factors supporting success at university: perceptions of successful 'non-traditional' students

Support networks	• Family, peers, staff (Kinnear et al., 2008; O'Shea & Devlin, 2011)
Personal characteristics	• Personal goals and aspirations (Kinnear et al., 2008) • Time management, organisation (Kinnear et al., 2008; O'Shea & Devlin, 2011)
Course characteristics	• Motivation, determination (Kinnear et al., 2008) • Seek help and information (Kinnear et al., 2008; O'Shea & Devlin, 2011) • Balance work, study and play (O'Shea & Devlin, 2011) • University and library resources (Kinnear et al., 2008; O'Shea & Devlin, 2011)

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Characteristics of teaching staff	• Positive interactions with teaching staff (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• An 'engaging' course which challenges thinking, beliefs and points of view (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• Clarity of unit structure (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• Clear expectations (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• An experience which creates a sense of belonging (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• Knowledgeable and passionate (Kinnear et al., 2008)
	• Approachable (Kinnear et al., 2008)

These students' self-reports point to the importance of their own goals and aspirations in motivation and persistence. Such personal goals and aspirations are well-recognised in the self-regulatory literature as important drivers underpinning personal actions and success (Zimmerman, 1990), such as seeking help, managing time and balancing responsibilities as shown in Table 1. Interestingly, while students recognise such personal goals and aspirations as being important for success, Kinnear et al. (2008) found that this was less recognised by teaching staff who focused predominantly on support and interaction to achieve student success.

Table 1 also shows how students across all diversity groups noted the importance of support networks, personal actions, the course and the teaching staff in helping them feel engaged and part of the community. This aligns with Trowler and Trowler's (2010) assertion that it is factors other than students' prior characteristics that determine whether or not they engage with the university and with learning.

While some differences have been observed in how different diversity groups perceive and approach education, researchers have noted that these are subtle, with the most significant differences being discernible when these same students are re-grouped by age or specific programs of study (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Kinnear et al., 2008).

2.1 The impact of maturity

Overall, older students as a group have been found to have a significantly stronger sense of purpose, stronger level of motivation and stronger level of enjoyment than younger school leavers (Ballantyne et al., 2009). While peer support has been found to be important irrespective of age, the perceived need for support was found to decline with age (Kinnear et al., 2008). Such differences in purpose, motivation, enjoyment and independence may well contribute to the differences students of different ages reported in their learning behavior. Mature age learners, for instance, have been found to be seven times more likely to complete class readings than school leavers, and mature aged parents were found to be twice as likely not to skip class (Ballantyne et al., 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that Kinnear et al. (2008) found that older students tend to show better academic achievement and progress than younger students.

2.2 The impact of the educational experience

Given the importance that the students attribute to the characteristics of the course and the staff in their academic success, it is also not surprising that these students were more satisfied and engaged in

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some courses than in others (Ballantyne et al., 2009). Grouping the students by course revealed more differences in engagement than did grouping the students by any category of diversity. This shows that the quality of the educational experience makes a difference for all students. But which elements and aspects of this educational experience make the difference?

3.0 Impacts on retention, achievement and progression

Examination of educational research reveals six interdependent elements in the learning environment that impact on retention, achievement and progression: (i) the design of the curriculum, (ii) how the curriculum is delivered, (iii) the nature of the class culture that is engendered, (iv) the nature of the assessment tasks and process, (v) the characteristics of the teaching staff, and (vi) the characteristics of the students. This is depicted in Figure 1.

Curriculum

Students

Assessment

Teaching staff

Delivery

Class culture
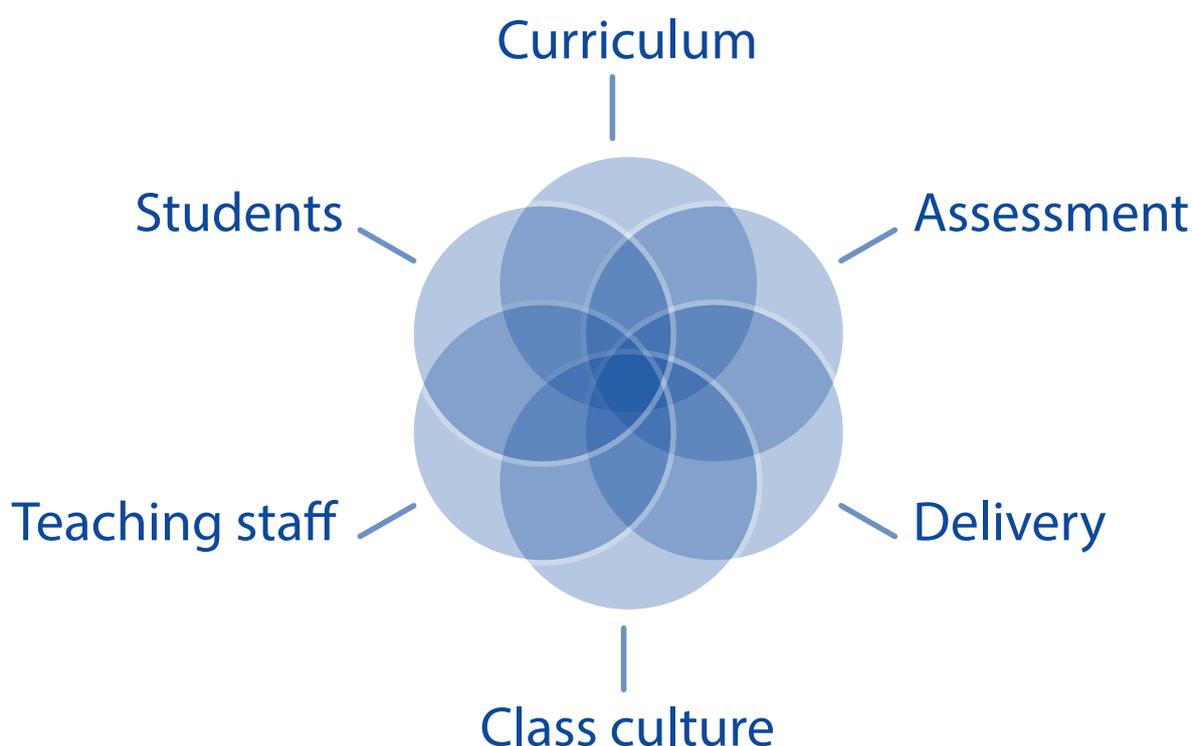
Figure 1: The interdependent factors impacting on retention, achievement and progression

Within each of these elements are various aspects which can impact positively, negatively or neutrally on student success as measured by student retention, achievement and progression. These are considered below.

3.1 The curriculum

The curriculum lays the base for learning. Table 2 highlights those aspects that have been found to measurably progress student learning and those which have been found to either set learning back or simply not progress it further.

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Table 2: Influence of different aspects of curriculum design on student learning and engagement

Positive impact	Negative/Neutral impact
Unit structure and expectations are clearly articulated (Kinnear et al., 2008)	
Challenging achievable goals (Hattie, 2009)	Goals too hard or too easy (Hattie, 2009)
Curriculum develops • critical thinking (Vardi, 2013) • background knowledge (Vardi, 2013) • threshold concepts (Hockings, 2010) • skills (Hockings, 2010)	Curriculum mainly requires recall (Vardi, 2013) Curriculum does not challenge students (ACER, 2011b)
Curriculum highlights • development of knowledge in the discipline • the theories, perspectives and approaches that frame the knowledge • underlying assumptions • major debates or disagreements in the area (Vardi, 2013)	Curriculum lacks information on the debates and disagreements in the discipline (Vardi, 2013)
Curriculum is inclusive of all students (Hockings, 2010)	Curriculum is tied too closely to the background of a particular group of students (Hockings, 2010)

These findings show that a curriculum designed to link back to students' understandings and forward to new learnings about the domain, including its concepts, skills and ways of thinking and doing, impacts positively on learning. Designing curriculum in this way provides the important path for each individual student to move from where they currently are to where they need to be. Where the curriculum does not resonate with a student and does not challenge the students to think and move ahead from their current level of understanding, progress is hampered.

3.2 The assessment

The role of assessment in progressing learning cannot be underestimated. Assessment has the potential to achieve two important functions, each of which impacts on the level to which a student achieves and progresses their learning. The first function is to gauge learning: the achievements, the misunderstandings, the road blocks and the ways forward. Gauging learning well allows both teaching staff and students to see how they are going.

Teaching staff can see how their teaching and curriculum is functioning and how they need to improve. Likewise, students can see how they are achieving, and what they need to do to improve. The second function is to extend students' learning.

Table 3 summarises those aspects of assessment that impact on these two functions and hence on student retention, achievement and progression.

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Table 3: Influence of different aspects of assessment on student retention, achievement and progression

Positive impact	Negative /Neutral impact
Assessment is aligned to the curriculum (Hockings, 2010)	
Mix and range of assessment types (Hockings, 2010)	
Assessment tasks are challenging, achievable and worthwhile doing (Martin & Dowson, 2009)	Use of rewards and/or punishments in relation to assessment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Martin & Dowson, 2009)
Students have some autonomy through control, flexibility and choice in assessment options (Hockings, 2010; Martin & Dowson, 2009)	Controlling with lack of choice (Martin & Dowson, 2009)
Sufficient time is provided for learning, development and completion of assessment tasks (Martin & Dowson, 2009)	
Models of good answers/ responses are provided (Hockings, 2010)	
Performance is judged against objective standards or criteria (Hockings, 2010)	Performance is judged relative to others (Martin & Dowson, 2009)
Feedback feeds up to goals, back to the completed work, and forward to future tasks (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)	Feedback provides answers without provoking thought (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)
Feedback focuses on deep aspects of the assessment (Vardi, 2012)	Feedback focusses on surface aspects of the assessment (Vardi, 2012)
Feedback is specific explanatory and prescriptive (Vardi, 2012)	Feedback is non-specific and does not explain poor performance or lack of success (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

These findings show that gauging learning effectively is enabled in four ways: (i) through sound design of tasks; (ii) through making performance expectations clear; (iii) through making sound judgements against these performance standards; and (iv) through good quality feedback. Together, these have positive impacts on learning.

In order to extend students' learning, these findings also show that motivating and challenging complex assessment tasks are needed which allow the student to self-regulate. When these two functions of assessment are enabled, they have a significant impact on student learning, engagement and achievement.

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3.3 The delivery of the curriculum

Designing a high positive impact curriculum, however, does not on its own ensure student learning and engagement. How that curriculum is delivered is particularly important. Key aspects of delivery that make a difference are summarised in Table 4.

The findings shown in Table 4 reveal the importance of transforming the curriculum into engaging learning experiences that get the students doing, thinking and communicating in various ways appropriate to the discipline. The literature points to the need for sufficient face-to-face interaction to support enculturation through modeling and experiencing with others the ways of doing, thinking and communicating in the community. With a sense of belonging, students have described engaging delivery as *"'bringing it alive', 'enlivening the whole learning process', 'influencing the way you see everything' and as generating a 'hunger for learning'"* (Kinnear et al., 2008, p. 69).

These findings also show that active, cooperative and collaborative activities that challenge and link current understanding and skills to new understandings and skills make a positive difference. However, they also show the importance of ensuring a range of different experiences to both cater to different learning styles and expose students to new learning styles.

Across all experiences, Hattie's (2009) extensive meta-analysis of teaching interventions shows that active, guided instruction from the teacher is significantly more effective than unguided facilitation. This includes instruction in those important strategies that underpin self-regulation. Such instruction is made all the more powerful when effective forms of feedback are used (Hattie, 2009). Feedback is a key way in which a mass education system can provide that important individualised just-in-time moment of instruction (Vardi, 2012).

Table 4: Influence of different aspects of delivery on student retention, achievement and progression

Positive impact	Negative /Neutral impact
Includes face-to-face contact with staff (Kinnear, et al., 2008)	Insufficient face-to-face time or support (ACER, 2011a)
Links student's knowledge base and aspirations to new learning (Hockings, 2010)	
Emphasises meaning making and depth of understanding (Hockings, 2010)	Emphasises recall (Vardi, 2013)
Employs: • active learning techniques (Trowler & Trowler, 2010) • cooperative learning activities (Hattie, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010) • collaborative learning techniques (Hockings, 2010)	Overemphasis on e-learning (Hockings, 2010)

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Positive impact	Negative /Neutral impact
Uses activist teaching methods: • direct instruction • reciprocal teaching • feedback • teaching metacognitive strategies • mastery learning (Hattie, 2009)	
Students: • do the thinking (Vardi, 2013) • are challenged and stretched (ACER, 2011b) • discuss real issues with the teacher (Abrami et al., In publication)	Teacher: • does the thinking • focuses mainly on the one 'right answer' or the 'one right method' (Vardi, 2013)
Individualises instruction (ACER, 2011a) and caters for diverse learning styles (Trowler & Trowler, 2010)	
In-class feedback probes, evaluates, verifies, corrects, prompts, reformulates and extends (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008)	Feedback only verifies the correct response (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

3.4 The class culture

The research shows that the design and delivery of the curriculum is enhanced by a class culture that supports learning, a sense of belonging and enculturation. Table 5 summarises those aspects of the culture that have been found to have positive impacts on student learning and engagement.

Table 5: Aspects of class culture that impact positively on student learning and engagement

Positive Impact
Promotes a community of enquiry (Hockings, 2010)
Promotes critical thinking and reflection beyond the campus (Hockings, 2010)
Creates a safe climate of trust for all to contribute (Hockings, 2010; Vardi, 2013)
Facilitates formation of peer support groups (Kinnear et al., 2008)
Engenders a sense of belonging through frequent and consistent formal and informal interaction (Kinnear et al., 2008)
Supports persistence and resilience (Kinnear et al., 2008)
Enables self-regulation (Vrieling, Bastiaens, & Stijnen, 2012)

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These findings demonstrate the importance of a learning environment that welcomes students into a community that helps them become both a successful student and ultimately a member of their chosen discipline. This includes supporting and enabling the dispositions and behaviours of students who self-regulate and think critically (Vardi, 2013). The nature of the social environment and its ambience is particularly important for the intellectual engagement, sharing and debate that underpins deep learning.

3.5 The teaching staff

The behaviours and attitudes of the teaching staff form part of another important element that has been found to affect student learning. Table 6 summarises the effects of different teacher characteristics.

Table 6: Influence of different teacher characteristics on student retention, achievement and progression

Positive impact	Negative/Neutral impact
Have positive relationship with students (ACER, 2011b; Hattie, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009)	Have a poor relationship with students (ACER, 2011b)
Are in regular contact with and interact with students (ACER, 2011b)	Do not interact with students (ACER, 2011b)
Are available, helpful, sympathetic (ACER, 2011b)	
High expectations of students (Trowler & Trowler, 2010)	Underestimate students (Hockings, 2010)
Know their students (Hockings, 2010)	Unaware of background or needs of students (Hockings, 2010)
Connect with the interests, aspirations and future identities of students (Hockings, 2010)	
Model critical thinking (Vardi, 2013)	Only demonstrate and explain (Vardi, 2013)
Engage intellectually with all students (Vardi, 2013)	
Exercise tight control over the learning (Hockings, 2010)	Exercise weak control over the learning such as relaxed rules of attendance and assignment submission (Hockings, 2010)

These findings highlight the enormous impact staff's relationships with, concepts of, and beliefs about students have on the students' identity, sense of belonging and achievement. When considered in light of the findings reported earlier, they also highlight the delicate balancing act that staff need to negotiate between providing sufficient control and support and allowing students to take control and do it on their own. According to Eshel and Kohavi (2003), control in the form of a well-organised and well-structured supportive environment can coexist with high levels of student autonomy, and results in high levels of student satisfaction and achievement. However, Garrison (1992) argues that not all

students have the necessary skills or are ready to assume control, and therefore need more support and intervention in the process.

These are overall judgements that staff need to make. Getting this balance right can result in demonstrable gains in both current and future levels of achievement.

3.6 The students

In order for achievement and progression to occur, however, students need to make choices and take actions. Table 7 summarises key influencing factors.

Table 7: Influence of different student characteristics, beliefs and behaviours on retention, achievement and progression

Positive impact	Negative/Neutral impact
Spend more time on campus (ACER, 2011a)	Spend less time on campus (ACER, 2011a)
Time on task (Trowler & Trowler, 2010)	Spend more than 16 hours/week in paid work (ACER, 2011a)
Self-regulate: • personal goals • proactive • motivated • ask questions • take responsibility for own achievement • structure and create environments that optimise learning • self-monitor (Zimmerman, 1990, 2002)	Lack opportunity to self-regulate (Vrieling et al., 2012) Lack opportunity to control their learning (Garrison, 1992) Bored (ACER, 2011a) Anxious (Hattie, 2009)
Believe: • ability comes through effort • learning is gradual • knowledge develops over time (Vardi, 2013)	Believe: • ability is innate • learning is quick • knowledge is certain (Vardi, 2013)
Have achieved highly in the past (Hattie, 2009)	
Have domain knowledge (Greene & Azevedo, 2007)	Lack domain knowledge (Greene & Azevedo, 2007)

As identified earlier in this review by the students themselves, these findings confirm the importance of students' own goals and aspirations in determining the actions that will make them successful. These findings further point to the importance of the beliefs that students hold, the depth of knowledge they have built, the experiences they have of achievement, and the opportunities offered by the environment. These are all areas that staff can influence through how they structure the learning environment and through their interactions with students. As Trowler and Trowler (2010) point out, it is not one side or the other that is responsible: engagement is a shared responsibility.

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Finally, these findings confirm the saying that 'success breeds success'. This points to the importance of a success-driven environment from the start, where real meaningful deep learning occurs.

4.0 Drawing it all together

In order for *all* students to successfully participate and achieve in tertiary education through their academic course of study, these findings highlight the importance of the following.

4.1 The importance of student goals, aspirations and beliefs

Student goals, aspirations and beliefs underpin the actions they take. Self-identity determines how students control and regulate their learning behaviour both in the present and the future (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). These beliefs and aspirations are strongly influenced by the environment, peers and teachers.

4.2 The importance of social connectedness and enculturation

Social connectedness and enculturation is important to becoming a successful student and to reaching one's future goals. Through making educationally purposeful connections with others, students forge their identities and start assuming the ways of thinking, doing, communicating and being of the community that they are joining.

4.3 The importance of the first year transition

The first year, and in fact the first session, is crucial to social enculturation, connectedness and the process of re-inventing oneself as a university student. Achieving success through meaningful challenging learning experiences in the first year lays the basis for success in future years.

4.4 The important role of the teacher

In John Hattie's (2009, pp. 238–239) extensive meta-analysis of impacts on achievement and progression, he notes that teachers:

▶ are powerful influencers of achievement

▶ need to be directive, influential and caring

▶ need to know their students well and 'see learning through the eyes of their students'

▶ need to be clear of what they want students to achieve, and to teach to the gap between students' current understandings and the criteria for success

▶ need to create critical thinking experiences in which students construct and reconstruct knowledge, and

▶ need to develop environments that are safe for students to discard, recast and explore knowledge, skills and concepts.

This review of the literature shows that through the curriculum and assessment tasks they design, the teaching methods they employ, the attitudes toward and beliefs they have about students, and the class atmosphere they create, teachers can actively influence and guide all students in powerful ways that can make the students' goals and aspirations a reality.

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