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***My Place. My Voice:* Student narratives about engagement and belonging in a higher education institution**

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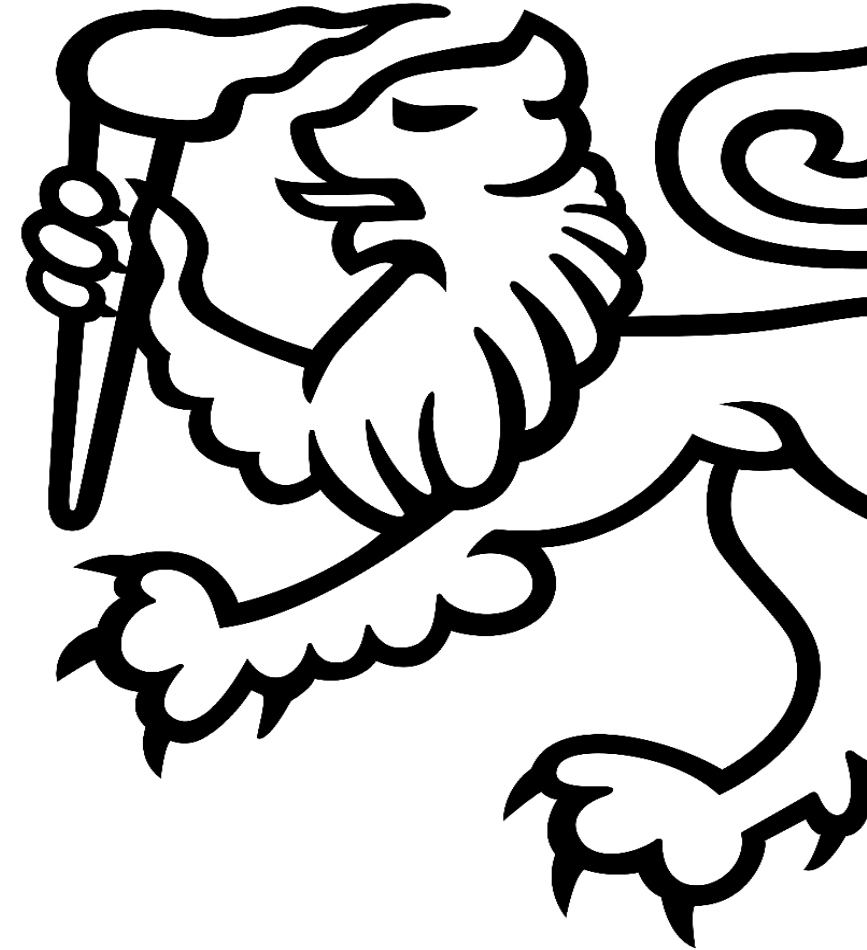
Academic Division

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with *Stephanie Taylor, Emma Atkinson, Eliza Winkler and Anna Taylor*

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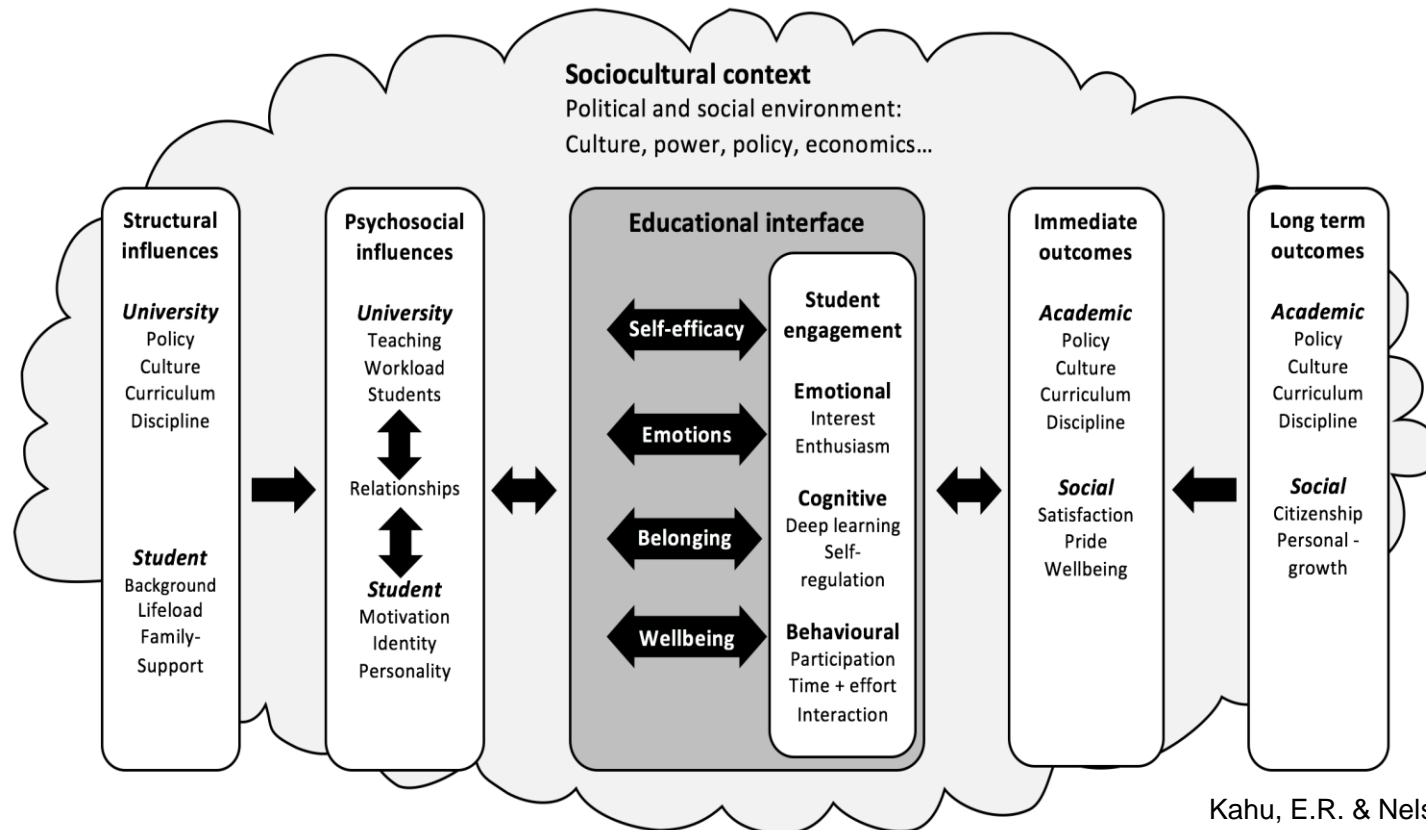
Student engagement and belonging

- Students' academic and social engagement with the university community → key contributors to overall student experience and to academic success, persistence and retention
- The ways in which students engage with their university through community groups and as partners to the university is often observed, but what is the connection in terms of the student experience?
- Institutional strategies to improve student engagement often focus on those aspects related to student behaviour and teaching, discounting the complex interplay of aspects that influence student engagement as well as the outcomes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)
- But what is engagement about from a student perspective?
- Research: students need more than just engagement, including
 - ➔ Sense of belonging – feeling of being involved with and connected to the university community, or part of the community

Student belonging is significantly associated with students' academic engagement and has the

Sociocultural Influences of Student Engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

- Antecedents and consequences of student engagement – through a cultural lens
- Builds on Kahu's (2013) integrative framework
- Educational interface between student and institution and the interplay between psychosocial mechanisms key to student engagement, success and retention



Kahu, E.R. & Nelson, K. (2018). Student Engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(1), 58-71.

The What Works? Model (Thomas, 2012)

Improving student engagement and belonging are at the heart of improving student retention and success

Key elements:

- **Early engagement:** engagement to promote belonging must begin early and continue across the student life cycle
- **Engagement across spheres:** engagement and belonging need to be nurtured across academic, social and professional spheres
- **Developing the capacity of students (and staff) to engage:** requires a partnership approach in which everyone is responsible for improving student belonging and institutions work with students to develop their capacity to engage effectively with their HE experience
- **Institutional management and coordination:** institutions must take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote student engagement

In addition, engagement and belonging initiatives need to be mainstream, proactive, relevant, well-timed with media, and collaborative



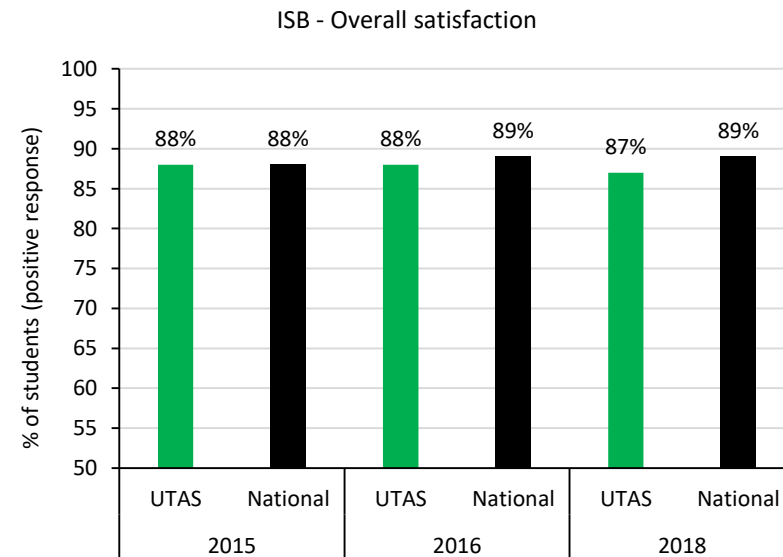
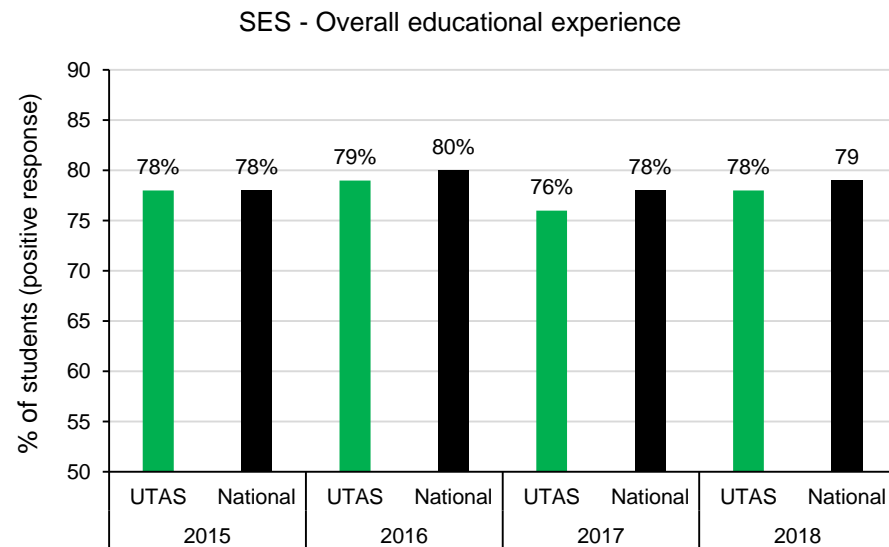
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The Student Voice



Performance Indicators

- Principal indicators of student experiences → based on progression data, participation rates and student surveys (e.g., SES, ISB, AUSSE)
- Widely used and useful at the institutional level, but provide limited meaningful information about the wide-ranging learning and engagement experiences of a diverse student population
- Students sampled at single points in time; don't capture the complexity of individual student experiences
- Barnett (2007) *“of the individual student with his or her own challenges and struggles, we gain little sense”* (p.8)

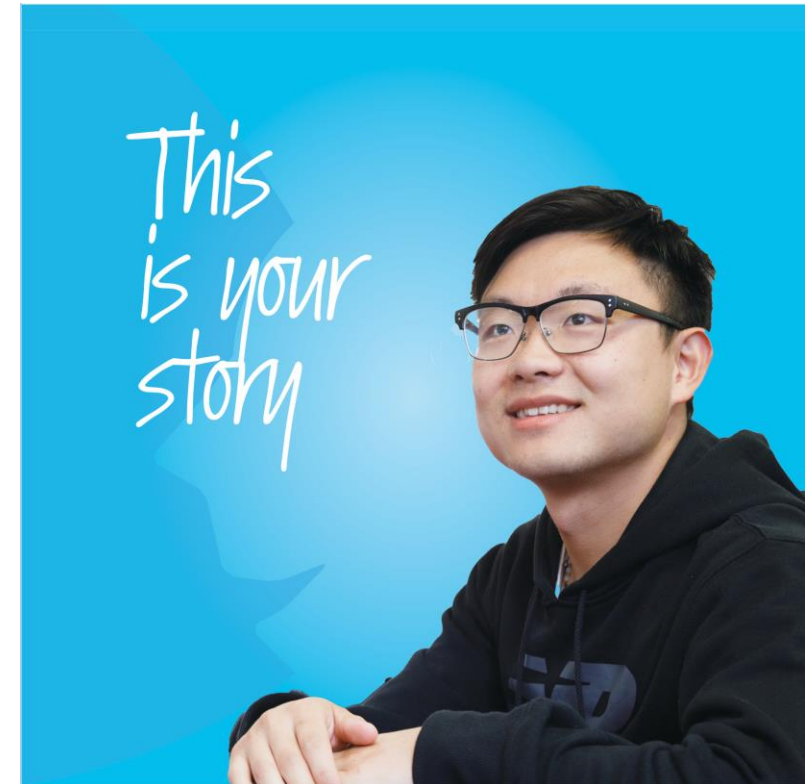


The UTAS Student Voice – *My Place.My Voice* Project

- Student narratives provide a rich context to complement performance indicators and provide deeper understanding of the student experience – of what it is to *be* a student
- *My Place.My Voice* project - designed to engage in broad consultation and deep discussion with the University's student communities
- Focus on two main themes:
 - Student views on ways to create a sense of community and belonging for students at UTAS, outside of the traditional learning environment
 - The types of decision making students would like to influence at the University and the ways they might do this



To guide and inform ongoing model of student engagement, participation and representation at the University, recognising students as partners and co-creators

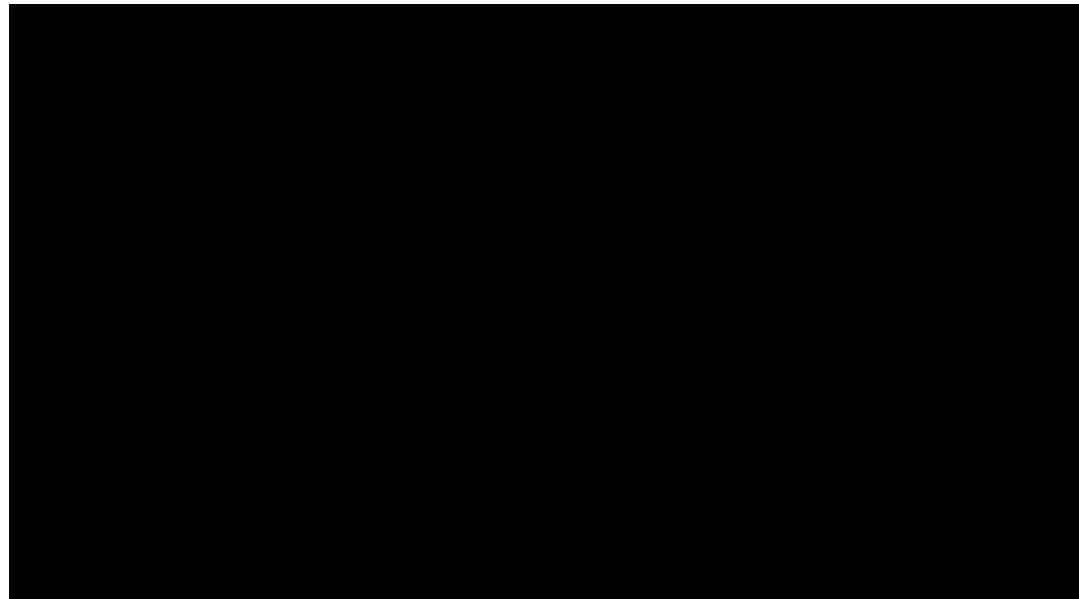


The *My Place.My Voice* methodology

- Student participation via a range of platforms
 - focus group discussion workshops (3-6 participants)
 - in-person surveys
 - online surveys] (open-ended questions)
 - Facebook discussion boards
 - snapshot post-it notes in campus social spaces
 - video interviews
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- Open to all students studying at UTAS (Semester 2, 2018)
 - 990 students participated across the different platforms over a 3-month period
 - Data analysis – NVivo analysis + thematic content analysis (inductive) for primary and secondary themes, by 2 researchers independently and cross-referenced



***My Place.My Voice* Project – Video 1**



My Place.My Voice: Findings – Main Themes

Ways students feel connected to and part of the University community

- The vast majority of students commented that they feel connected to and a part of the University community.
- 5 main themes:
 - **Engaging with other students & staff** – opportunities to meet new people, catch up with friends, ‘chill out’ away from study; e.g., through organised social activities and events, hanging out in social spaces, joining informal study groups; ability to connect in the online environment [most frequent response]
 - **Belonging to University club or society** – opportunities to connect with other students having a shared interest
 - **Participating in classes** – engaging as a member of the group taking the same unit or course
 - **The people** – having friendly and supportive students and staff who welcome & engage with them, reach out to them to help deal with a problem or issue they have
 - **A vibrant university community** – they see around them or are a part of a community lively with people and bustling with activity e.g., walking around campus, studying in library [more dominant for on campus]

How the University can develop a stronger sense of community and student belonging?

- **Opportunities to engage** with other students and staff, on own campus and across campuses and online e.g., more social spaces, activities and events, inclusive of staff and students and across diversity groups
- **Affordable and accessible facilities & services** – e.g., related to parking, accommodation, healthy food options, longer opening hours, cross campus transport
- **Accessible study spaces & computers** e.g., in libraries and other venues, more seating and computers, quiet study spaces, the learning management system
- **Opportunities to embrace multiculturalism & diversity on campus** – events and activities to showcase and educate others and engage with students across cultures. Also for students (particularly international students) to engage in and celebrate own culture-specific events and festivals
- **Student information and communications** – about University events, management decisions on issues relevant to students, and important news at national, international and global level. Timely communications across multiple platforms
- **Non-curricula academic activities** – e.g., open-campus forums accessible from a distance as well, with invited keynotes, public debates, Q&A events - to stimulate and enhance student learning and thinking, facilitate student engagement with peers and staff, and develop students as locally and globally aware citizens

How the University can develop a stronger sense of community and student belonging cont'd

- **Being an environmentally sustainable university** - by way of promotional campaigns, waste management practices and availability of green spaces on campus. Also, by only investing in or partnering with sustainable industries and organisations, particularly those that engage in renewable energies
- **Promotion of mental health & wellbeing** - in the form of promotional campaigns, more health and wellbeing events, available counselling and other support services, and more 'chill out' areas for students to de-stress or share experiences
- **Employment, volunteering & career development** - opportunities to engage in employment and volunteer work on campus and in local community - to meet others and/or earn an income while studying. Also, opportunities to meet industry employers and professionals in their fields
- **Equity across campuses** –responses mainly from students at smaller satellite campuses – relating to opportunities to engage with other students and staff, accessible study spaces (particularly in libraries), access to student information and communications, facilities and services, and student parking; consider students studying via distance
- **Opportunities to engage with local communities** - to meet locals, experience and learn more about local traditions and issues, visit tourist attractions and events. Also having opportunities to engage in community volunteer work with the University facilitating students connecting with communities

Issues and decisions students would like to be able to influence at the University

- **Social activities & events on campus (and online)** - decisions about types of activities and events, location and scheduling, (also inclusion of alcohol); facilitating connections for students studying via distance
- **Allocation of Student Services and Amenities Fees** – student involvement or representation in University decisions about allocation of SSAF funding, for greater transparency and to influence allocation in specific areas (e.g., clubs or societies) or specific campuses (particularly smaller campuses and distance students)
- **Courses & units** – timetabling of classes (greater flexibility), University decisions that result in changes to courses and units (withdrawal, rescheduling)
- **Employment & careers** – job security, employee rights and employment opportunities – e.g., related to casualisation of the workforce, staff redundancies, out-sourcing of services – particularly for future employees but also current staff
- **Quality of academic teaching** – being able to evaluate staff performance, having a mechanism for making complaints, transparency of management decisions

How the University can empower students to engage with the things they would like to influence

- **Regular opportunities for all students to have a voice** – to engage with decisions and issues that effect them – relevant to the University, College, course and campus location - more surveys on more issues, discussion and focus groups, social media, polls
- **Proactive University engagement & consultation** with students – on key policies & management decisions that effect them. Also having face-to-face consultation with the decision makers
- **Proactive student union** – students empowered to engage and influence through representation. Student union needs to be in touch with current issues and have a strong voice within the University
- **Student leadership development** – build student skills & confidence to critically analyse issues and communicate their views. Opportunities for students to develop leadership skills through training/mentoring
- **Keep students informed** – information is empowering. Students need timely information, on current issues and decisions under consideration, with the University transparent in decision processes and outcomes
- **Evidence that the student voice is valued** – University demonstration that student input and feedback is valued, acted upon and leads to change. Transparency of management decisions and actions is one way to show students are valued and trusted

What the student narratives tell us ...

- The findings of *MyPlace.My Voice* affirm the importance of belonging and help us understand the different ways students engage with the University and develop a sense of belonging
- The student voice is essential for unpacking and understanding the quantitative performance data
- Many of the findings expected; other findings are reflective of today's student population and culture:
 - an environmentally sustainable university
 - embracing multiculturalism and diversity
 - awareness and concern for university staff
 - academic conversations on national and global issues
- The institution and its people are critical for student engagement and the development of belonging
- Students want to engage and belong – with the institution and its people – and they want to be active influencers in their learning and broader university experience (students as partners)
- The findings fit well with Kahu and Nelson's sociocultural context of student engagement → highlighting the importance of the educational interface between student and institution (and interplay of mediating mechanisms) in influencing student engagement, academic success and retention

Where to?

My Place. My Voice student narratives are/can:

- drive Student Experience strategy and initiatives, and
- inform collaborations and partnerships with the student union and other representative bodies
- **Future focus** – building ‘the student narrative’ into the institutional culture
- Ensuring themes don’t detract from **individual stories and voices**



- Students as partners – not just engaging through participation. Need to move away from traditional ideas of student engagement to more robust partnership-driven experiences, where:
 - students are genuine partners for change
 - students are actively involved in the creative direction and purpose of the University; and
 - the student voice promotes student engagement through a sense of community, belonging and individual importance

***My Place.My Voice* Project – Video 2**

