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Article

'I would say the mark itself, it doesn't tell the whole story': the student view of what success means

Gwenda Mynott
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the findings of a research study that aimed to investigate how undergraduate Business students measure the success of their own learning. The setting was a post-1992 university in the North-West of England. Higher education institutions and government policy can appear fixated on student success as a quantifiable outcome of an undergraduate degree course; it is something that can be measured via the grading system. As such, the meaning of student success can appear to be straightforward; however, this paper sets out to question this assumption. The findings of the study show that how students thought lecturers measured success was markedly different from how they talked about measuring their own success. They viewed lecturers as being focused on things that could be measured, such as grades. How the participants talked about their own success was far more nuanced and it focused on emotion in addition to grades. For the participants, success meant proving something to themselves and the enjoyment of having learnt something new. Another notable finding was that the participants wanted to feel they had earned their success through challenge and hard work. The contribution this study makes to knowledge is to add to a small and important body of work on how undergraduate students view success. It challenges the normalised identity of an undergraduate Business student as being grade-focused and, in doing so, argues that an understanding of the enjoyment of learning and the sense of personal satisfaction that academic achievement can bring adds a much-needed richness to a student-centred understanding of what success in HE means.

Keywords: student success; joy of learning; higher education.

Introduction

Success in higher education can seem to be unquestionably positive; who does not want students to be successful? That universities should strive to support the success of students in this way appears to be indisputable and longstanding; it was noted by Yorke (2004) over two decades ago. Despite this, there are few definitions of what student success is, and very little is written about what success means to students (Higher Education Academy, 2016). This paper presents and discusses the findings of a research study that aimed to investigate how undergraduate business students measure the success of their own learning. Student success is typically viewed as a quantifiable outcome of an undergraduate degree course; it is something that can be measured and is used in both government policy and institutional settings as a method of assessing the quality of educational provision. This can mean that student success is not problematised, and how students view their own success is an under-researched area of study (Picton, Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

The subject area of Business and Administrative Studies accounts for the highest number of UK students overall in terms of subject area (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022) and, globally, Business schools are a growth area for universities (The British Academy, 2021). Business students, however, are frequently maligned as being consumerist in their approach to learning and overly focused on grades (Koris and Aav, 2019) and future employment. Grades and graduate employability outcome metrics are what higher education institutions are now judged by (Higher Education Academy, 2016; Sá, 2020). Being a good student means you get rewarded with success, which in turn leads to success in gaining a graduate job. This feeds into and from the neoliberal discourses in which the 'externalisation of success factors is largely manifested through reference to employability, wealth imperatives and productivity' (O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018, p.1063). This shift reflects the marketisation of UK higher education, and universities can feel pressured into focusing efforts into quantifiable outcomes. In this construct, success is something that can be measured via such things as attainment data and graduate outcomes, and the research in this area frequently uses objective measures of success (Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019). I have used a qualitative framework to explore what meaning undergraduate Business students give to success. In doing so this research is significant in that it challenges much of the dominant discourses in this area. It challenges the normalised identity of an undergraduate Business student as being grade-

focused and in doing so highlights the enjoyment of learning and the sense of personal satisfaction that achievement can bring.

Understanding success in higher education

This section aims to provide a discussion of some of the pertinent literature. It is not an exhaustive review of the literature and is very much informed by Thomson (2020), who describes 'reading against the grain of the field' and argues that 'if the result of your critical reading of your field results in finding literatures not often recognised and valued, it is important to read them – and to hear what they say'. This is the approach I have taken in locating, reading and using the literature I will now go on to discuss.

Much of the literature on success focuses on objective measures of success (Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019). This views success as something that can be measured and forms part of the government's push for quality and value for money (Allen, 2020; Sá, 2020). As one of the students in the Allen (2020, p.13) study states, 'to the government, student success is black and white…100 per cent dedication to the course, above-average marks, clear direction where you're going with the degree [and] finishing within the top percentile'. This epitomizes what a successful student is. More recently the move to push graduate employment up the HE funding agenda means that student success is also measured in terms of graduate destination data.

There can be a dichotomy in the literature in this area. Within the competitive environment that UK universities find themselves in, with a focus on league tables and attracting future students, high levels of student attainment can be the goal for HE institutions (Ashwin, 2020) while at the same time, students are often criticised for being overly grade focused to the detriment of learning and having a broader view of what knowledge means (hooks, 2010). Much of the literature, especially if the student is viewed as a consumer, can appear to demonise students for overly focusing on achieving the highest grades and for wanting that success to lead to getting good jobs (Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2018). The view of the modern student as consumerist and goal orientated becomes exacerbated by claims of dumbing down of UK HE for students who are viewed 'through discourses of lack, failure and decline' (Finn, Ingram and Allen, 2021, p.187). If HE is seen as a commodity, and students as consumers, then much of the

literature implies that what is at risk is the development of learners as scholars (Anderson et al., 2018; Calma and Dickson-Deane, 2020). However, it is important to note that the view that a student can develop, learn and self-fulfil while not focusing on grades can be partly argued to be linked to the traditional middle class male student who has family backing to support him even if he fails to achieve academically (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). For the first-in-family working class student, high grades can be important for many different reasons, and a focus on outcomes does not necessarily mean that the student considers themselves to be buying a degree, as implied by the consumerist persona of the modern student. The focus on grades can be especially meaningful for students who have previously been traditionally excluded from higher education and can be seen from a social justice viewpoint (Coates and Matthews, 2018).

Grades, then, *do* matter; however, what is often overlooked is what success in achieving good grades means for the students themselves (Picton, Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019). Rather than taking a superficial view of the student as motivated by turning their investment in HE into financially rewarding employment, success can also be viewed through a lens of emotion (Humberstone, Beard and Clayton, 2013; Allen, 2020; Sá, 2020). In this sense, success is a form of personal validation (O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018) and a growth in confidence (Allen, 2020). This sense of the subjective view of success is often overshadowed by the objective, measurable view of success. However, I argue that it is equally, if not more, important in understanding student motivations and levels of satisfaction. This is what O'Shea and Delahunty (2018, p.1068) refer to as both 'success as defying the odds' and 'embodied and emotional success'. This may be stronger in non-traditional students and linked to what Wong and Chiu (2019 p.272) found in their study of high achieving non-traditional students, which was that 'one key driver … to study at university was a desire to prove to themselves or to others their abilities'.

Success can also be contextual, and it is important to question any generic claims about what success means to students. Clack (2022, p.145) gave students a choice as to whether to be assessed or not and found that students wanted assessments because 'they wanted to be rewarded for their hard work … they wanted to know how well they had done' and 'they didn't want students who hadn't attended to receive the same grade as they did'. This adds an aura of competitiveness that hooks (2010) attributes to the idea of

learning as individualistic, private and competitive. The implication that success is about individual hard work and effort is markedly different from the findings of Nyström Jackson and Salminen Karlsson (2019), who found that 'effortless success' was valued and that 'stress-less achievement' where academic work could easily be fitted in with other activities was held in high regard. What potentially explains the difference here are the settings, and it is an important distinction. Clack (2022) worked with students with a range of ages including mature students who had a variety of different educational experiences prior to university study and who were mainly female. Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson (2019) studied students from prestigious higher education programmes and argued success was frequently aligned with traditionally masculine traits such as competitiveness, individualism and rationality. That discourses of success can be viewed as both gendered and based on class is an important consideration in a mass education system that aims to widen participation. If the dominant discourse prevails, it means that despite hard work and effort students may not have their successes celebrated or recognised. It is systemic factors that mean some students are deemed more successful than others (Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019) rather than embodied in the individual student.

The literature on success overly focuses on supporting students to become successful, rather than questioning what success means to students and problematising how policy and institutions skew meanings of success to things that can be measured. This can mean that more subjective but potentially important aspects of what success means are lost.

Research design

I have approached my research with a constructionist epistemology. As such, I believe that there is no 'objective truth waiting for us to discover it' (Crotty, 1998, p.8). The topic of student learning is often studied from a psychological perspective and therefore frequently takes a quantitative approach. The deductive and positivist approach does not fit with either my world beliefs or the research aim itself. The constructionist world view of how things can be understood fits both with my ontological stance as interpretivist and aligns with the research questions, which seek to explore rather than prove. I have taken an interpretivist stance that takes the lived experience of the social world into account (Crotty, 1998), which differs from much of the research into student success.

Qualitative methods can support what Patrick and Middleton (2002, p.28) describe as 'rich, holistic descriptions' that 'emphasise the social settings' within which the research takes place. This fits with my research question as student learning and success takes place within the context of the Business School and the Business and Management discipline. Semi-structured interviews had a practical and theoretical fit with my research aim. The research setting was a Business School within a post-1992 university in the North-West of England. The school comprises approximately 2,600 undergraduate students, which is just over 9% of the total university student population. Post-1992 universities are an important area of research as their expansion has been driven by the widening participation agenda and a different ethos of academic study than the older so-called redbrick universities. Not only do post-1992 establishments attract a more diverse range of students than traditional universities (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010), they have a different outlook on the employability agenda due to the historical alignment of polytechnics to industry and employment (Stoten, 2018). While Business and Management courses attract a high number of international students in the UK in general (The British Academy, 2021) the number of international students at undergraduate level is low in my institution. Notably, many of the students are commuter students or continue to live at home.

All undergraduate students in the Business School were emailed an invitation to participate. In all, 19 students were interviewed. The sample size was small but in line with the constructionist and interpretivist viewpoint of not wanting to make generalisations but rather investigate meanings and perceptions (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). As such, the approach was both purposive and convenience sampling. It was purposive in that I endeavoured to make sure that there was a mix of students from different years and a balance in terms of gender. It was a convenience sample in that it also depended on who volunteered and was willing to be interviewed (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Rather than focusing on a particular feature of the student body, for example, gender, class or race, my research recruited across undergraduate courses. Of the 19 participants, only five could be described as traditional students in that they gained university places via the traditional direct entry route of school A-levels. Two identified as the first in their families to attend university, two were mature students, and two identified as having non-UK backgrounds having moved from abroad with their families. Eight came via indirect entry routes. The sample gives an understanding of the complexity of cohorts of students who need to be

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catered for and taught in a mass education system. In studying a group of students across programmes and academic levels I have given consideration to how these experiences interrelate (Sykes, 2021).

Most interviews took place online during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020. I approached the interviews by actively listening and giving the students the space and time to talk, using some prompts if necessary (Roulston and Choi, 2018). I wanted the interviews to feel more like a conversation, and using online video rather than a phone call helped to facilitate that and to build a rapport (Archibald et al., 2019). The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The use of thematic analysis is appropriate in that it enables flexibility, which gives depth and richness of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The framework put forward by Braun and Clarke (2013) was used. The six-step approach to thematic analysis stresses that this is not a linear approach but more of a repetitive process that involves nonsequential movement between stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethical approval was granted via the relevant ethics committees. There can be a tendency to think that, once ethical approval has been given, ethical considerations are complete, but I view ethics approval as part of ethical practice that is a continual process of reflection and awareness and forms a foundation of good research practice. This was particularly so given that I was interviewing students during the Covid-19 lockdown and while they were in their home settings. There was a constant cycle of reflection and review to ensure I was working within ethical guidelines. I chose to use pseudonyms to de-identify participants in the findings (Heaton, 2022) and re-assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings and discussion

This section intertwines the findings and discussion, informed by the pertinent literature, to form a narrative around the question of how students measure the success of their own learning. It is subdivided into the following themes: how students think lecturers measure success, and how students measure their own success. This second subsection is further divided into proving something, success as personal development and finally, intellectual challenge.

How students think lecturers measure success

> I haven't got a clue [how lecturers measure success]. I presume that they just go off whatever number comes up on the screens ... so I just think, honestly, … numbers. There's a big Excel spreadsheet of people with red, green and amber (Noah).

Surprisingly, when I asked the participants how they thought lecturers measured their success the answers were markedly different from how they talked about measuring their own success. They viewed lecturers as being far more focused on aspects that could be measured. This mainly revolved around attainment, attendance and being seen to engage. As Eddie states, 'they're not going to every individual person, they're going to see grades on a paper. Is this person getting high enough grade? Could they get higher grades? … in the end, that's what the University uses as their success meter'. The participants' view of lecturers was frequently linked to an awareness of being in a mass education system. Cohorts of students in the Business School can be over 300 students, and marketing material for prospective students frequently includes promises of individual support and guidance. The participants in my study had a more pragmatic view of studying on a course with hundreds of students, which can make the forming of relationships between individual students and staff harder than in a previously more elite and less egalitarian system of HE (Myers, 2008). In thinking that lecturers viewed success as quantifiable, the participants clearly indicated that they knew they were one of many and not treated as individuals.

Interestingly, the participants saw attendance and engagement as another way lecturers measured student success. Millie said that 'I'd say a lot of them measure it through attendance, so I know a lot of them have said they see a correlation between grades and attendance'. What is problematic here is that there is no definitive evidence that attendance is causally linked to higher attainment (Halpern, 2007). This means that students can see the focus on attendance as more about how lecturers feel because, as Jake puts it, 'if you go they'll be happier because they feel … that you got the success because you've been there. Yeah. They've made an impact on you'. This is more about the self-validation of the lecturer than the depth of learning achieved by the student. There was also a link between attendance and engagement, with Jack describing how lecturers measure success via 'marks and attendance … but it's also the performance and even the

attitude, how you are'. A broader attitude to success comes through strongly when the students talked about how they measure the success of their own learning.

How students think about their own success

> I would say the mark itself it doesn't say the whole story (Jack).

It is understandable that grades are important to students, and the participants did acknowledge this. What is of note is that only two participants, George and John, thought success was purely about grades. The other participants, forming a majority, indicated that, while grades were important, there were also more subjective and affective meanings attached to their definitions of success. This is important because it gives a deeper understanding of what it means to be a student and the associated motivations to learn. As Noah said, 'If my mum and dad say you've done well, well then that is a big thing to me'. Even if grades are important to students, it is the feelings, emotions, and reward of effort associated with the grade that matters. What constitutes success for one person may be deemed a failure by another (Nyström, Jackson and Salminen Karlsson, 2019). Some of these affective meanings of success discussed by the participants were associated with proving something, personal development and associated with being intellectually challenged and these themes are discussed next.

Proving something

To many of the participants, proving something, often to themselves, was a strong emotion that played out through much of what they had to say. Interestingly, success was about proving that they could achieve and included some level of personal validation (O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018). Recurrently, this feeling of proving something was in relation to not having done as well as expected in previous educational settings and more specifically during A-level examinations. Chris described it as 'running away from that version of hell' of A-level results day and stated, 'I wanted to do really well this year to prove to myself that like I could do it'. Not doing as well as expected at A-level appears to have had a profound effect, and learner identities are often influenced by prior experiences of education. Noah talked about his A-level results as being a wake-up call and that 'I've always been like quite clever. I worked hard, reasonably good at sport. You know and then that was just a big knock down for me … I don't want that to happen again'.

Success then is not purely about a grade; it is about the meaning of that grade to the individual student and how that meaning supports their self-identity as someone that can achieve and can excel in an educational setting. The embodiment of success as personal validation is significant in understanding what success means to students. As such, perceived previous academic failure can be viewed as part of the story of student experience and not something that should be automatically thought of as negative. Several participants in my study had come to university through the clearing system, which is a process that allows students who have not secured a place at university through the regular admissions process to find available places. As Eddie puts it, 'the way I set my mindset is, as soon as I came into uni, I thought in the end, it's not my first choice uni; it means I've got to get a first at the end of it'. These students are not passive but active in changing their narrative and using their perceived prior failure at A-level as a motivation to succeed at university (Ajjawi, Dracup and Boud, 2021).

Interestingly, in addition to self-validation, there was also a sense of them proving themselves to others. What is of note is that this came through strongly in the first-in-family participants. For Ruby, it was about proving something not only to herself but also to her family. As the first in her family to attend university, and actively discouraged by her boyfriend from applying, it was about thinking:

> I'll learn more than him, and I will do better [to] sort of to prove him wrong so that's my plan to be the breadwinner in the family just to prove because he even says it now when I'm applying for graduate jobs he's saying see you shouldn't have gone to uni, and I'm like no just wait I'll prove you wrong (Ruby).

This ties in with the work of Delahunty and O'Shea (2021, p.473), who discuss 'the future-focus of possible selves' in first-in-family women. Hannah, another first-in-family participant, indicated that, for her, success was about the grades: 'I am very like grade oriented. If I put in my best, if I haven't got the grade that I wanted, I'm like, well I didn't do well enough. Uhm, so yeah, I'm very much like if I don't get a first then I've failed', but she then went on to explain that, as the first in her family to attend university, it was about wanting to 'make everyone proud'. This leads to discussions around personal development and a sense of achievement.

Success as personal development

Cachia, Lynam and Stock (2018, p.437) found that 'academic success is perceived by university students as both a process (personal development) and an end goal (university qualification)', and my findings echo this. It is a different viewpoint from the usual lens of academic success as being driven purely by attainment, and it is important as it gives us a richer understanding of students, their motivations, and their experiences of learning. Jake stated that 'I do measure my success by the result [but] I don't just think about the result. There's always a more, there's always a better, you can always improve'. Even if success is all about results, there is still a sense of personal development and effort (Sá, 2020). Eddie saw this as part of growing up and said, 'in the past I would have said it is [about grades] I think now as … I'll say more mature individual … I'd say it's also possibly about your overall satisfaction', and Ella said: 'I've grown a lot now I want the grade to prove all of this'.

This indicates that success can be both subjective as well as objective and is about feelings and emotions (Sá, 2020). It can be about reward for effort put in, and this was indicated by Eddie, who stated: 'I knew that I put in a load of work towards that [grade] and it paid off really … it makes it a lot more satisfying to be completely honest'. For Chris, success was about grades but 'also I think probably how much I enjoyed learning about it as well'. These narratives are important in showing that students view success more deeply and emotively than purely objectively, and this moves away from the narrative of students being overly grade orientated (Humberstone, Beard and Clayton, 2013). That students enjoy learning is seldom noted in the literature, and interest in the subject area is rarely noted as a motivator to study. This leads into a discussion around intellectual challenge and student success.

Intellectual challenge

For the student, the emotional connection to learning can be viewed as about gaining or developing understanding in a particular subject area. Yet discussion around knowledge and disciplinary subject matter is scant in the literature. As far back as 2009, Barnett (2009, p.430) commented that there was a 'near disappearance of knowledge from debate about higher education'. The participants of my study, however, did talk about success as understanding or learning something. This is important as it demonstrates that students value knowledge acquisition and being able to think critically about their discipline. This aspect of student learning can be often overlooked, and the presumption can be that

students prefer to be passive learners who avoid critical thinking (hooks, 2010). Olivia stated that success meant 'if I can understand it in kind of like going through it again in my head, or if I can then explain it to someone', and for Ruby, it was: 'when I understand it within the seminar context … the learning outcomes, sort of that's success in learning'. For Jack, this meant that 'it's necessarily not always about the grades or degrees or awards, so it's about how I can actually use what I just learned'. Ashwin (2020, p.101) purports that 'students change their sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and subject knowledge' and this sense of change is alluded to by Sam, who talked about being able to understand things in the news because of studying an Economics module and 'more of a uh like a global sort of sense and if I hadn't done the learning, I certainly wouldn't be able to understand what on earth people are talking about'. What is of importance here is how students interact with the knowledge and subject matter of Business Studies and being challenged to think differently.

The lack of challenge is one of the surprisingly few complaints that appears in the interview data. Business Studies and related subjects are often criticised for lacking academic rigour and intellectual challenge (Parker, 2018). This is reflected consistently year on year in the National Student Survey statistics, in which Business Studies scores below average on intellectual stimulation as compared to other subject areas (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021). That there are tensions in this area for Business related courses can partly be explained by the pressures between employee competencies and scholarly competencies in Business schools (Hibbert, 2016). Ciara, a UK home student, had mixed feelings about finding the first year easy but said: 'It was probably a relief at that point because I was going through freshers and everything but now I'm like in second year I think back to it … I did not learn anything new, so I paid nine grand for nothing. So, in that way it's annoying'.

This is interesting as intellectual stimulation and challenge is mainly overlooked in the literature when addressing student satisfaction, which mainly focuses on the more functional aspects of university experience such as assessment practices, timetabling and the smooth running of the courses they are on (Dean, Shubita and Claxton, 2020). A study by Clack (2022) gave students the option to be assessed or not and saw students opt for assessment because they saw grades as a reward for hard work and wanted to know what they had achieved. I propose that students want summative assessments because of what

grades mean to them in terms of proving something to themselves and the sense of development it gives them. They want to be challenged to feel successful. This is an important finding in that it provides an antidote to the more typical view of the student as grade hungry to the detriment of their learner identities.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed what success means to students. In doing so, it highlights how, while students think lecturers judge success via metrics of attainment, the students themselves see success as more nuanced. Success to them is about proving something to themselves and developing and understanding knowledge in a way that is enjoyable to them; there is also a sense of personal growth and development that is difficult to quantify. As such, definitions of success could include achieving academic goals, engaging with intellectual challenges that foster the enjoyment of learning while encouraging personal growth and development. These emotional aspects of success are frequently missed in what is becoming a progressively more metrics-driven HE system. I argue, though, that this emotional side of success that the participants talk about is hugely important and should not be overlooked. It adds a depth of understanding of students' learner experiences that is often lacking in the literature, and it especially mitigates against the view of Business students as only grade hungry with the goal of securing graduate jobs. While grades and graduate employment are significant, they are by no means the only priority for these participants. It is of note that, if success in learning is seen as being intellectually stimulated and challenged to learn something new, then the participants in my study felt that this was at times lacking in their studies. In wanting to be more challenged, these students flip the issues of HE away from a focus on the individual student and how to make them successful and back onto curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment design. In doing this it is hoped that students find joy in the intellectual stimulation of learning.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Gwenda Mynott is a Senior Lecturer at the Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University. This paper is improved by her research as part of a PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement at Lancaster University.

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