



Mismatch between student and university expectations of academic achievement: A negative outcome from well-intentioned student support or a driver for improved academic performance?

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ABSTRACT

Student perceptions of their studies and learning are important influencers of academic performance and outcome. Here we find that the grades students anticipate obtaining may differ significantly from grades awarded: students' perceptions of their studies appear to be at odds with the university's assessment of their academic worth. A previous study introduced students to the concept of self-efficacy and its effects on academic performance and outcome; we demonstrate that students' self-efficacy can be raised. Importantly, the focus is not on the validity of the concept of self-efficacy as the guiding or defining principle in this research, but rather a means to potentially identify important student perceptions that may influence academic performance. Moreover, the effect emphasises a mismatch between student and university expectations of the measure of achievement: students overestimate their anticipated grades against grades awarded. By encouraging improved self-efficacy are we emphasising differences between anticipated and awarded grades? Are we diminishing the student's sense of achievement and therefore negatively impacting on student performance? To resolve this, in this study we shift the focus from the purely analytical analysis of the impact of self-efficacy and highlight assumptions of the primacy of grades as signifier of academic success. Academic success is motivated by a desire for learning as much as for good grades. Furthermore, a student's academic success reflects a complex of socio-personal influences. These perspectives allow the effects of improved self-efficacy to be formative in the student's maturing sense of belonging within education. The survey and concept of self-efficacy is now better understood as the vehicle for improved experiences of learning, becoming potent drivers of student success.

Keywords: assessment, grade distributions, student perception, academic achievement, self-efficacy

Introduction

In recent research on reasons behind student failure to succeed, Nelson (2018, p. 1050) notes, "conventional wisdom encourages educators to cultivate success by creating expectations among students, with the intention of boosting motivation and empowerment". This may result in sensitive students being "paradoxically disempowered when we insist that success is within their control". Importantly, Nelson argues that a significant confounding "ineradicable element" is chance and luck. Despite this perspective, conventional educational wisdom prevails. While chance and luck may be beyond the control of educators who design and implement programs, educators continue to seek approaches encouraging positive student expectations. Relationships between students' conceptions of learning and knowledge and their experiences as learners are understood to be complex and important, articulated through "specific constructs describing study behaviour, and students' perceptions of, and preferences for, different kinds of instruction" (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004, p. 408). Entwistle and Peterson (2004) argue that student understanding of learning comprises an important influence on learning approaches, methods or strategies. This can be examined from various perspectives. Norodien-Fataar (2018), for example, demonstrates how student-learning disposition is produced by "active and strategic exercise of ... affective, conative, and cognitive ... embodied dimensions" (p. 505): design of approaches to student engagement requires understanding of such practices. More pragmatically, O'Shea and Delahunty (2018) record how students understand their academic success, noting students frame 'success' in relation to their own biographies and social realities – diversity in personal and cultural approaches to studies is thus important (Pillay, 2002).

While a consideration of each of these concepts could be expanded upon to understand the full extent to which each of these factors influence student perceptions, in order to focus the paper more purposefully, on an extension to Entwistle and Peterson's argument: that, while students prefer "coherence between their approaches and the demands of the learning environment", rather than "constructive friction" (p. 425), learning develops better when students' conceptions are challenged. They argue that "if educational aims are to be achieved, students' current preferences will need to be overridden by designing learning environments that make students somewhat uncomfortable, while providing enough support to allow new strategies to be developed without undue anxiety". While student discomfort may not be the most desirable (if temporary) condition, this observation suggests an approach to working with students that assists them to change their

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conceptions of learning and knowledge. Entwistle and Peterson argue the need for disruption before aspirations for academic success can be realised (cf. Kilpatrick, Barnes, Heath, Lovat, Kong, Flittner and Avitaia, 2019). Indeed, educational literature demonstrates that encouraging students beyond their current knowledge level while leveraging what they already know is a critical element of the learning process.

This paper explores a feedback process that helps students examine their own learning conceptions, but which inadvertently has also become a conceptual disruption. The original study (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018) yielded surprising results, including insights into a tension between the students' own perception of achievable outcomes and the university's perception of the same. This tension is explored here, notably from the perspective of the role of student expectations and how they play out in the university system.

Two decades ago, Vermunt and Verloop (1999) drew attention to student learning implications of differences between student and teacher regulation of learning. These are borne of key cognitive, affective and regulative differences in how students learn and teachers teach. They argue that, "when learning is conceived more as self-regulated knowledge construction than as taking in already existing external knowledge, the role of teaching changes too, from transmission of knowledge to supporting and guiding self-regulated knowledge construction" (p. 258). They were considering the capacity for learning and teaching to support congruence, arising out of compatibility between students' learning strategies and teachers' teaching strategies. While friction or incompatibility may arise, they note the capacity for friction to be both destructive and constructive. Destructive friction results in ineffective learning, reduced thinking skills, misconceptions, reduced learning potential, etc. Constructive friction, however, may challenge students to increase learning or thinking skills, and may be "necessary to make students willing to change and to stimulate them to develop skill in the use of learning and thinking activities they are not inclined to use on their own" (Vermunt and Verloop, 1999, p. 270). In recognising the increasing importance of process-oriented teaching, they argue that integrating learning and teaching may support learners to self-regulate their learning processes. Student self-regulation is, however, predicated on understanding how students conceptualise both the learning environment and their own learning.

Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo and Prosser (2008) explore the diversity of student conceptions of, and approaches to, learning, identifying "connections between variations in conceptions of and approaches to learning and course marks" (p. 279). They describe students who hold 'cohesive conceptions', tending towards engaging with deep learning approaches and scoring high marks. Such students experience higher quality learning based on understanding rather than reproduction. Other students, typically holding 'fragmented conceptions', tend towards surface learning approaches and score lower marks; quality of learning is generally lower, relying on reproduction rather than understanding. Importantly, the focus here is not on concepts of approaches to learning, but rather the finding of Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo and Prosser that "it is likely that actions taken by the teacher to help students *reconceive the role of learning* through discussions are most likely to make the difference" (p. 280, emphasis added).

While again we reiterate the focus on the challenging of student perceptions, reconceiving the role of learning in this context is not, however, straightforward. Students can vary their approaches to learning and study, and this capacity for change may be influenced by multiple factors. For example, Nijhuis, Segers and Gijsselaers (2008) identify students' perceptions of three factors – learning environment; clarity of goals; appropriate workload – influencing their propensity to adopt deep or surface learning strategies. The adoption of deeper approaches to learning can be both encouraged and discouraged by characteristics of the learning environment, and students' *perceptions* of the learning environment play a critical role in *how* they learn. (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Docky, 2010). Struyven, Dochy, Janssens and Gielen (2006, p. 292) urge that "the way students perceive and understand their learning context and the way they approach their learning in relationship to these perceptions have been found to be major intervening factors between teachers' teaching and learning outcomes". Further, Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Docky emphasise that the way students perceive the learning environment is more important than the learning environment itself.

While Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Docky list important aspects of learning whose perception may influence adoption of mode of learning – "workload, teaching, supportiveness, clarity of goals, usefulness of course book, independent study, relevance to professional practice and assessment" (p. 248) – they also note that "fewer studies addressed the reverse relationship, i.e. the pre-assessment or backwash effect of assessment on learning, according to which the student anticipates the perceived assessment requirements and as a consequence changes [their] approach to learning to meet these requirements" (p. 249). This suggests that students perceiving assessment demands on a deeper level tend to adopt deeper approaches and strategies, while students perceiving assessment as assessing lower levels tend to employ surface approaches or strategies; whether assessment mode influences perceptions is unclear. Importantly, student *perception* of assessment, linked to learning, may be important for assessment outcomes.

Segers, Nijhuis and Gijsselaers (2006) also demonstrate the importance of student perceptions on how they choose to study. They conclude that, "students who express their intentions to employ a certain learning strategy perceive the assessment demands as such and actually employ a related learning strategy" (p. 223). Student perception of learning tasks and their evaluation of assessment authenticity is also important. Gulikers, Kester, Kirschner and Bastiaens (2008) note that students consider that they study more deeply and develop stronger professional skills if they perceive an assessment to be more

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authentic.

Other studies remind us that high student self-efficacy and positive self-concept also assist students to succeed in higher education. Bennett, Kapoor, Rajinder and Maynard (2015), in examining “the extent to which students were able to perceive themselves in terms of roles, attitudes, beliefs and aspirations”, conclude that while students to some extent project their future lives and work, “the low self-esteem demonstrated by [some] may well be indicative of the challenges they face negotiating their first year of post-secondary study” (p. 103). Bennett, Kapoor, Rajinder and Maynard acknowledged that while practical matters such as “expectations of course and experience, and difficulties associated with culture, language, social environment and the loss of personal support structures” are important, “individual self-concept and self-efficacy is also crucial and is likely to be negatively impacted by any one of these factors” (p. 103). Accepting a positive relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic outcome, Metcalf and Wiener (2018) demonstrate variability in the mediation of academic self-efficacy, pointing to the effects of generation (e.g. first-in-family) and prior study preparation.

The effect of self-efficacy and self-concept may arise when a student is faced with choice or an unfamiliar mode of learning. Cheng, Tsai and Liang (2019) recently examined this from perspectives of student ‘hardiness’ and self-efficacy, drawing positive associations between student commitment, control of affect, and challenge to academic self-efficacy. Ayala and Manzano (2018) also identify hardiness and resilience as positive predictors of academic performance. An element of challenge, along with the capacity to meet the challenge, may therefore be constructive in developing a student’s capacity for academic success.

A student’s tendency towards self-motivation is also important. From a teaching perspective, students who are autonomously motivated respond positively to “autonomy-supportive teacher behaviour” (Duchatelet and Donche, 2019, p. 733); unmotivated students require other stimuli. Stoszowski and McCarthy (2018), in examining student perceptions of autonomous *versus* didactic learning, identify key themes underlying students’ sense of how to achieve: students value being able to plan and direct, and being in control of their own studies and learning; students recognise learner autonomy as both a desired and required skill beyond studies, critical for self-growth and life-long learning. Alonso-Tapia and Pardo (2006) identify key motivational traits for student learning engagement: learning, outcome and avoidance orientation. They identify two equally important motives for successful study: “*the desire to learn, increase or experience one’s own competence and the desire to obtain a positive evaluation of such competence*” (p. 296, emphasis added). This perspective is significant. Alonso-Tapia and Pardo argue that, “the desire to obtain a positive evaluation of [the student’s] competence, is positively related to fear of failure” (p. 296). The motive *both to learn and for positive evaluation* can, they suggest, lie at the heart of sense of self-worth. This appears to be a significant driver for student engagement with learning, reinforcing that student self-conceptions and understandings of the learning environment are key drivers of student success. In this light, this paper explores the possible impacts of a dissonance between student and university grade outcomes and expectations.

The Research Problem

Real-time point-of contact feedback has been shown to enhance student expectations (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018). Based on an online survey with embedded feedback, it was tested whether it was possible to increase students’ levels of self-efficacy. In working with student capacity to believe in their ability in academic achievement, the study tested possibilities of supporting significant change in students’ conception of their own learning. By focussing on student perceptions of the grades they could aim for, it was demonstrated that, with an increased awareness of the role of self-efficacy, students generally raise their *expectations* of grades they anticipate receiving. The study demonstrated a surprising level of change in self-perception, and thus an inferred increase in students’ sense of self-efficacy. The extent to which students might maintain their improved perceived levels of self-efficacy, however, or translate these levels into improved academic performance, could not be examined in the initial study. This follow-up paper, therefore, revisits this approach with a new cohort of students to explore the degree to which the apparent increase in self-efficacy may have influenced the students’ end-of-teaching-session outcomes, focusing on the effects of this increase on students engaged in an introductory university science unit (labelled ‘GEI’ here).

Methods

The survey, based upon the concept of real-time point-of-contact feedback (Lake, Boyd, Boyd and Hellmundt, 2017) and developed into a self-efficacy survey (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018), was used to engage students by presenting information about the concept of self-efficacy and providing tailored feedback depending on how students answered. The survey was run twice, once as a University-wide survey (Session 1 2017; Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018) and once as a first year undergraduate unit survey (Session 1, 2018). Students were asked to indicate their average grade expectations for the coming session; after being introduced to the concept of self-efficacy, they were asked what grade they were *now* aiming for. The degree to which students responded to the new information – that is, whether they considered, during the short survey period, that their attitude towards their own academic performance had changed – was tested through a reassessment of their anticipated grade. The study was run under our University’s Human Research Ethics Committee approval; the data were collected using Qualtrics.

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Data used in this paper is derived from the following sources.

- *The results of the University-wide self-efficacy survey (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018), Session 1 2017.* This survey was distributed in week 0 (the week prior to teaching at the beginning of the teaching session), to the total cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University. Analysis was based on 847 completed returns. The data used here is the frequency distribution of the grades students anticipated receiving, declared before and after they had been told about the effects of self-efficacy on academic performance within the same survey.
- *University-wide undergraduate awarded grade frequency distributions, Session 1, 2017.* Obtained from the Office of Planning, Quality and Review at our University. The data is agglomerated data with no identifying information.
- *The results of the unit-based (GEI) self-efficacy survey, Session 1 2018.* This survey was distributed in week 10 (close to the end of teaching session). No formal lessons were given on the subject of self-efficacy prior to the survey, although students were aware that the survey was a requirement of the unit. The survey was distributed to the total cohort of first year students enrolled and continuing at week 10 in the unit (104). With the exception of possible occasional repeat students, no student in this cohort had completed the University-wide survey. Analysis was based on 83 completed returns. The data used is the frequency distributions of the grades students anticipated receiving, declared before and after they had been told about the effects of self-efficacy on academic performance.
- *The awarded grade frequency distributions for the first year unit GEI.* For the 83 students who completed the survey for Session 1, 2018. The data is agglomerated data with no identifying information.

Results

The self-efficacy literature established the importance of mastery experiences, demonstrating the potential to shift student expectations of their academic achievement (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018). This encouraged the use of the survey in a first year unit to allow closer examination of its effects, especially for students at a formative stage of university studies. The students were given the same survey after having receiving marks from the two of four assessment tasks in the unit; this way they had some awareness of their level of achievement. Regardless of this, the results again indicated an increased level of professed self-efficacy (Figure 1).

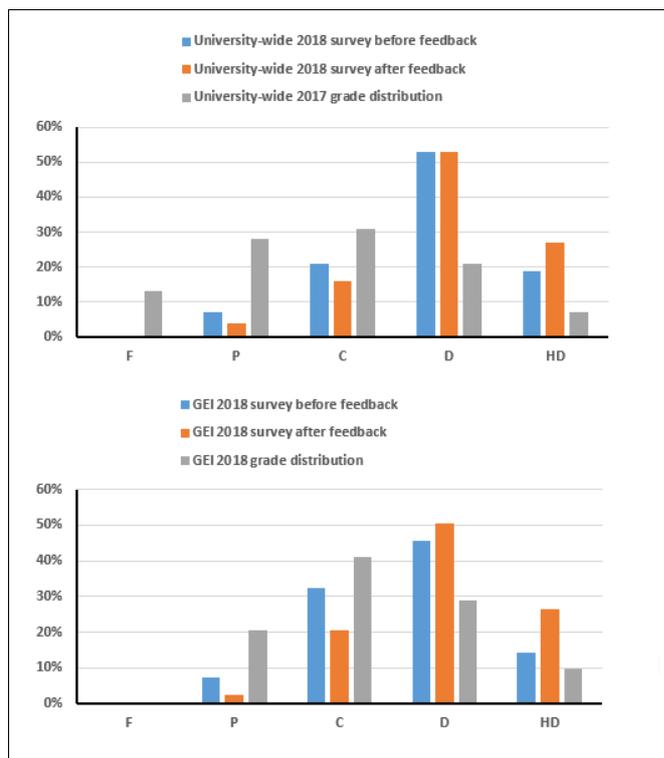


Figure 1. Grade frequency distributions across the surveys employed

The figure above shows grade frequency distributions for (top) the Session 1 2017 University-wide survey and (bottom) the Session 1 2018 individual first year unit survey, showing students’ statement of their expectations of grades, before and after being informed about the influence of self-efficacy on student academic performance (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018), and the grade frequency distribution of grades awarded for the teaching session for the entire target cohort. Grades: F, Fail; P, Pass; C, Credit; D, Distinction; and HD, High Distinction. The GEI grade distribution only includes grades of students who completed the self-efficacy survey; none failed.

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The original study (Lake, Boyd and Boyd, 2018) used anticipated grades as signifiers of students' sense of their own potential academic achievement, and considered the implications of a change, over a short time, in student self-assessment. It became apparent that frequency differences between *anticipated* and *awarded* grades were also significant (Figure 1). The clear pattern is that students, regardless of their knowledge of the influences of self-efficacy on academic performance, significantly over-estimate the grade they anticipate achieving. In particular, while anticipated grades were skewed towards higher grades, i.e. tended towards a median grade of Distinction, the frequency distribution of awarded grades more closely resembled a normal distribution, tending towards a median grade of Credit. The University's assessment policy has long mandated standards- or criterion-based assessment, and does not approve of norm-based grading. The closer-to-normal distribution of the awarded grades is *not* an artefact of the grading rules, but probably reflects the normal distribution of academic performance in the student cohort.

This mismatch between the frequency distribution of awarded grades and students' anticipated grades, both before and after the survey, appears to be substantial. The pattern is repeated in the single first year unit survey (Figure 1), again with anticipated grades tending towards higher grades, while the distribution of awarded grades tended towards a median Credit grade.

Discussion

This paper opened with Entwistle and Peterson's (2004) suggestion of the positive learning effects of a degree of student discomfort. The argument is for a student support mechanism to constructively mediate the discomfort; Entwistle and Peterson's claim forms part of the validation for the development of the survey used in this study. It is now shown, however, that this very tool may have revealed a significant point of *potential* discomfort, the notable difference between students' expectations regarding the recognition of their academic performance and the reality of grades awarded. Studies elsewhere have demonstrated both a positive relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic outcomes (e.g. Metcalf and Weimer, 2018), a partial link between academic success and self-efficacy (Day, van Blankenstein, Westenberg and Admiraal, 2018), and that self-efficacy does not predict academic outcomes (Foulstone and Kelly, 2019). However, Richardson, Abraham, and Bond (2012) provided a counterview in a meta-analysis that identified performance and academic self-efficacy are two of the clearest motivational predictors of GPA in higher education settings. Despite this conjecture, if demonstrable links between self-efficacy and performance are difficult to establish, it is unsurprising to find evidence suggesting a potential mismatch in a student's anticipated and actual performance. This is a finding recorded elsewhere. Edwards, Kellner, Siström and Magyari (2003), for example, found that students self-grading their own performance but receiving lower grades were likely to overestimate by two full grades; students receiving a higher grade were less likely to overestimate their grades. Accuracy of student self-assessment and anticipation of grades has been shown elsewhere to be consistently poor (Foster, Was, Dunlosky and Isaacson, 2017). Similar in conception, the Dunning-Kruger effect could also be at play with students conducting their studies with a cognitive bias of illusory superiority assessing their cognitive ability as greater than it is and therefore the potential for students to not recognise their lack of ability. The patterns are strikingly similar to the evidence recorded in this paper, suggesting that little has changed in higher education despite efforts to modernise teaching, learning and assessment. Perhaps more importantly, these and prior published findings provide a useful reminder that the relationship between student efficacy, performance and outcomes is not simple. Kahu and Nelson (2017) remind us of the complex interactions between students and institutions, and of "four specific psychosocial constructs: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging and well-being, which ... are critical mechanisms for mediating the interactions between student and institutional characteristics and student engagement and success" (p. 58).

Acknowledging the difference between expectation and reality is important, given that grades are the primary signifiers of a student's academic achievement. Assessment is an important part of student perceptions of learning (Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo and Prosser, 2008); how a student chooses to study is influenced by their perception of how the learning will reward them (Pillay, 2002). However, grades play a role beyond merely evaluating the success of a student in meeting individual learning goals. Grades are currency (Beatty, 2004). Students place high importance on grades awarded, and grades can play a role in job selection and progression to further studies (Agustiani, Cahyad and Musa, 2016); grades may be measures of perceived value for a student's education dollar (Nagle, 1998; Judson and Taylor, 2014), especially with the growing market focus on higher education (Hemsley-Brown and Lowrie, 2010; Taylor and Judson, 2011; Pirrie, 2018). Grades also indicate to the student whether they have properly mastered a learning task. Such mastery experience is important in reinforcing levels of self-efficacy (Wilson, Marks Woolfson and Durkin, 2018). Positive experiences feed improved self-efficacy, while negative experiences may stimulate a decline in self-efficacy. However, the difference in expected grade over awarded grade implies that, regardless of any change in levels of self-efficacy, it is questionable that students will necessarily achieve grade outcomes as expected against a more normalised curve. While this may differ from one individual to the next, in general, they are unlikely, therefore, to achieve their desired or expected level of capital.

The implications of this finding are significant. Student expectations of their academic performance are important (Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003). A mismatch between expectation and reality may lead to a loss of morale, in turn impacting the student's sense of self-efficacy, and influencing their academic progress (Bennett, Kapoor, Rajinder and Maynard, 2015), especially given that a student's own understanding of their approach to learning can be related to their perceptions of assessment and course marks (Segers, Nijhuis and Gijsselaers, 2006; Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo and Prosser, 2008; Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Docky, 2010). However, given that student self-assessment of future grades tends to be poor (Foster, Was,

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Dunlosky and Isaacson, 2017), and that self-efficacy does not necessarily predict academic outcome (Foulstone and Kelly, 2019), the impact of the mismatch need not be negative. Hardiness, as adaptive coping, correlates well with academic *engagement and performance* (Vizoso, Rodríguez and Arias-Gundin, 2018). While this may provide the challenge that is part of student hardiness linked to self-efficacy, we return to student constructs of the relationships between expectation and reality. The recognition of two important motives for successful study – the desire for learning and increased competence, *and* the desire for good grades (Alonso-Tapia and Pardo, 2006) – implies that grades *per se* are not the only markers of success. Improved learning and competence signify important shifts in academic engagement. Are we, therefore, asking the wrong question? Rather than expect an equivalence between improved self-efficacy and higher grades, should we be more interested in improved learning and competence, as important elements of a student's integration into the culture of academe, specifically, of being a 'student'? In the GEI unit, we are able to identify other manifestations of learning and student advancement, by leveraging the official unit feedback to provide evidence of how the unit supported student development. For example a comment regarding the extent to which the unit helped them to build valuable skills, was they had also learned "Time management, negotiation skills, self-belief and academic expression". A quantitative metric was a 96% positive response to a question asking them the extent to which interaction between students was encouraged, which can in itself help to foster a sense of belonging.

Chester, Johnston and Clarke (2019) provide important insight here. Focusing on social capital, they claim that, "the explicit development of trust, reciprocity, information sharing and cooperation in student and staff networks can *improve learning experiences and enhance belonging*" (p. 11, emphasis added). This expands the discussion from an instrumental consideration of grades and grading, and indeed of any measure of academic success, to one of the roles of education in supporting the development of the student's identity as an integral member of the learning community. Regarding student perceptions and practices as predictors of performance, while pre-university perceived self-confidence may have no impact on learning outcomes, competence in personal and intellectual growth positively influences involvement (Mukhopadhyay and Tambyah, 2019). In turn, student confidence positively impacts on intellectual growth. Self-efficacy as 'productive mindset' may be related to a broader spectrum of outcome, including coping with life circumstances, developing professional identity, mastering self-management and developing a sense of belonging in a learning environment (Lane, Moore, Hooper, Menzies, Cooper, Shaw and Rueckert, 2019). In the GEI context, assessment support students to develop a product or initiative to address and environmental issue. A number of students have now taken their initiatives beyond the classroom, creating real-world impacts. Two examples of such positive outcomes are the drastic reductions in single-use plastic on campus and the Fijian Junior Surfing team now surfing on fins made from recycled marine plastic. These types of outcomes can have a substantial impact on student perceptions of their own academic worth. Importantly, they serve a higher purpose beyond the administrative requirements of assigning grades as the official signifiers of the student's achievements. Such external acknowledgement of the student's worth provides powerful authentic feedback to the student. Picton, Kahu and Nelson (2018) support that "perceptions of success have important consequences for students in terms of increased positive emotion, self-efficacy and course belonging" (p. 1260).

Despite these examples of positively constructive relationships, some experiences may be negative. MacKenzie and Maginess (2018) recorded that "some students report bruising or unsympathetic encounters with the 'System', perceiving the university as a system, somehow closed to them" (p. 44). Our point-of-contact survey design is explicitly designed to address such perception: it makes explicit the implicit, the ideas, expectations and language that academics take for granted, but that students may not understand, let alone be aware of. It is easy for students to feel that the system is of limited access to them. The modern university is a publicly accessible institution, serving the wider society. While academics may see the campus as a public space, many in society identify the institution as a place of power and authority of restricted access. This extends to the rules, cultural expectations, behaviours and languages of universities, such that newer generations of students (e.g. first in family, minority or working class) may feel closed off to the culture of the university. One symptom of a sense of limited accessibility may be that performance expectations do not match reality. Dickson and Summerville (2018) record an alarming situation in discussions with students: "... to our horror ... we could not evade the truth that our students actually expected to be unwell ... [they] had internalised the narrative that they do not have the right to be well during their studies ... our institutions have done little to correct the perception that students are somehow meant to suffer" (p. 28). They talk of a "paradigm of suffering". While our students were not necessarily unwell, may it be that a mismatch between grade expectations and reality engenders a sense of suffering? The importance of Dickson and Summerville's observations is not student unwellness, but that suffering may be an inherent part of the student's educational experience. This may account for Jevons and Lindsey's (2018) 'the middle years slump', a period in which students' negative expectations of their own ability may be a major factor in dropping out of studies. There are parallels with Nelson's (2018) assertion that chance and luck are perceived to play a role in a student's success.

More constructively, such insights remind us of the importance of students' construction of being a 'student', and hence of succeeding as a student, based on their understanding of the educational environment (Struyven, Dochy, Janssens and Gielen, 2006; Nijhuis, Segers and Gijsselaers, 2008; Segers, Nijhuis and Gijsselaers, 2006; Gulikers, Kester, Kirschner and Bastiaens, 2008; Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Docky, 2010). In effect, students build their own narratives of success, narratives that include – and if we allow it, dominate – expectations of the measures of success, i.e. grades. Considering students and student positions from the perspective of lack limits the capacity for discourses of betterment, opportunity and achievement (O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty and May, 2016). Waddington (2018) argues for "a compelling need for compassionate academic leadership

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in our universities ... [for universities] to be 'caregiving organisations' because of their role and primary task of helping students to learn" (p. 87). She notes the "the relentless neoliberal instrumentalisation and marketisation of higher education" eroding this assumption. What can be done? Might we harness the strengths of MacKenzie and Maginess's (2018) moralised compassion? For teaching, "compassion must be part of an outlook which creates a warm welcome and a door to understanding to all students, acknowledging that they [teachers] too were once students, thus imaginatively identifying with the constituent of similar possibilities ... teachers need to be nuanced and engaged, not just about their subject, but as communicators" (p. 44). While not specifically discussing grades and grading, a moralising perspective on the place of grades and grading is worth examining. Such an approach may displace grades as the dominant reflection of academic quality.

Lane, Moore, Hooper, Menzies, Cooper, Shaw and Rueckert, (2019) recently suggested a framework – "the development of productive mindsets, the management of life circumstances and the way [students] relate to others and identify with their profession" – to integrate "connectedness, mindsets, self-management, professional identity and academic capabilities" (p. 954). This approach offers possibilities of working beyond the dilemmas of a mismatch between grading expectations and reality. Importantly, it helps understand the role of the survey in drawing explicit attention to concepts of self-efficacy as *artefact*. O'Donovan, den Outer, Price and Lloyd (2019) draw attention to the 'feedback artefact' and its role in relation to not only assessment and feedback design, but also in peer and tutor relationships, students' assessment literacy, etc. The act of providing and receiving feedback, rather than only the content of that feedback, plays a role in itself in influencing students' perspectives of learning. We suggest that it is the self-efficacy survey *as an artefact* that is important for our students, not the growth of improved self-efficacy *per se*. The fact that students have declared a change in self-efficacy could be a signifier of an expanded engagement with their role as 'student' and growing sense of belonging in higher education (MacFarlane, 2018; Chester, Johnston and Clarke, 2019). This expansion will improve daily engagement with studies, and *may* result in improved grades. Student engagement is multi-faceted (Tai, Bellengham, Lang and Dawson, 2019; Norodien-Fataar, 2018), and sense of success may be framed personally, socially and culturally rather than by mere academic measures, as was demonstrated by student feedback to the GEI teaching staff (Pillay, 2002; O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018). The notion of imagining a possible self within the growth of students' identity (Smith, Hunter and Sobolewska, 2019) resonates here.

Conclusion

This paper explores a complex problem at the heart of the university student experience. Grades serve several roles, notably as expressions of academic achievement and as currency signifying a student's worth. Both are important. It is equally important that the curriculum and pedagogy surrounding the student's learning at university provides the supportive framework for students to take full responsibility for their learning and to achieve learning outcomes as best as possible. Academic teachers, therefore, need to find ways in which to support students to such ends. Here we explore the implications of a discovery that suggests an unintended outcome: a program designed to improve students' self-efficacy – with the specific intent of positively influencing their academic development and achievement – highlights a potential mismatch between students' perceptions of grades they will achieve against the reality of the distribution of awarded grades. If student aspirations are thwarted, then any benefits of increased self-efficacy may be questioned. Furthermore, if the thwarting is enhanced by the very increased self-efficacy, we are faced with a tricky problem. This problem is predicated on an assumption of the primacy of grades as signifier of academic success. Acknowledging that academic success may be motivated by more than just a desire for good grades, specifically by a desire for learning, opens possibilities in understanding the positive effect of enhanced self-efficacy. Despite the grade mismatch, improved self-efficacy as 'student', and a maturing sense of belonging within the educational system may have long-term benefits. The survey and improved student understandings of the concept of self-efficacy become valuable as artefacts in themselves. The act of engaging in these, regardless of their specific content, contributes to improving the learning experience and student's sense of belonging, thus becoming potent drivers of student success.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

- Educators may find improved success in teaching if they appreciate that student engagement in learning is multi-faceted. In particular, there is opportunity for a changing relationship between educator and student, if a student's sense of success is understood to be framed personally, socially and culturally, rather than solely by academic measures. The concept of student self-efficacy is a powerful motivator for student engagement. Educators can support student development by encouraging student to become aware of self-efficacy and its potential effects on student performance. However, educators should be aware that self-efficacy, in itself, will not necessarily improve student performance. Rather, it helps in raising student expectations of their performance, and thus improving a student's engagement with learning.
- Educators need to be aware of the importance of a student's self-identity as a student. The educator is a key connection between the individual student and education system, and so plays an important role in assisting students to foster their sense of identity *as a student*. It would be appropriate, therefore, for the educator to adopt a compassionate ethos, one that would influence the educator's communication with the student. MacKenzie and Maginess's (2018, p. 44) exhortations provide a solid basis for compassionate communication with students: "compassion must be part of an outlook which creates a warm welcome and a door to understanding to all students,

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acknowledging that they too were once students, thus imaginatively identifying with the constituent of similar possibilities ... teachers need to be nuanced and engaged, not just about their subject, but as communicators". The long-term benefit of such an approach is the student's maturing sense of belonging within the educational system.

- In seeking feedback from students on their experience as learners, educators would be advised to treat the process less as a data-gathering activity, and more as an opportunity to provide an artefact that signals trust to the student, and provides a vehicle for students to develop their own sense of trust *as a student*. In shifting the flow of information from student-to-educator to educator-to-student, the educator risks creating greater benefit to the student's learning than by the educator simply gathering more data. Educators will benefit from reflecting on, and adopting, O'Donovan, den Outer, Price and Lloyd's (2019) notion of the 'feedback artefact' and, importantly, its role in relation to not only assessment and feedback design, but also in peer and tutor relationships, students' assessment literacy, etc.
- There is a good argument for educators to challenge the notion of grades as the dominant reflection of academic quality. Such a challenge arises from the notion that academic success may be motivated by more than just a desire for good grades.

Biographies

Warren Lake is a casual teaching and research academic at Southern Cross University who is focused on the role of feedback in facilitating student learning. Warren is also dedicated to understanding proficiencies in all areas of teaching and learning through the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Hanabeth Luke's work focusses on regional community resilience in times of transition. She uses social research to inform strategic planning decision for scientists, industry and government, translating complex scientific research for a general readership. She is the coordinator for Southern Cross University's Regenerative Agriculture program.

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<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=7Li25sIAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

William Boyd's scholarship of teaching & learning encompasses research student engagement, curriculum development and professional mentoring. He has published in the field for nearly thirty years. http://works.bepress.com/bill_boyd/,
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