

THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE: AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR GUIDING PRACTICE

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This paper proposes a conceptual framework with the aim of contributing to a broader understanding of student engagement and success. The concept of the student lifecycle is proposed as a useful means of integrating planning and practice, and linking curricular and co-curricular discourses from the first-year to the senior-year experience.

Lifecycle-Informed Program Design

The notion of the 'student lifecycle' is a conceptual shorthand for describing the *constellation of evolving identities, needs and purposes* as students enter into, move through and graduate from university. It can be usefully viewed as a series of *transitions* towards (future students), into (commencing students), through (continuing students), up and out (graduates) and back (alumni) to university (See Figure 1).

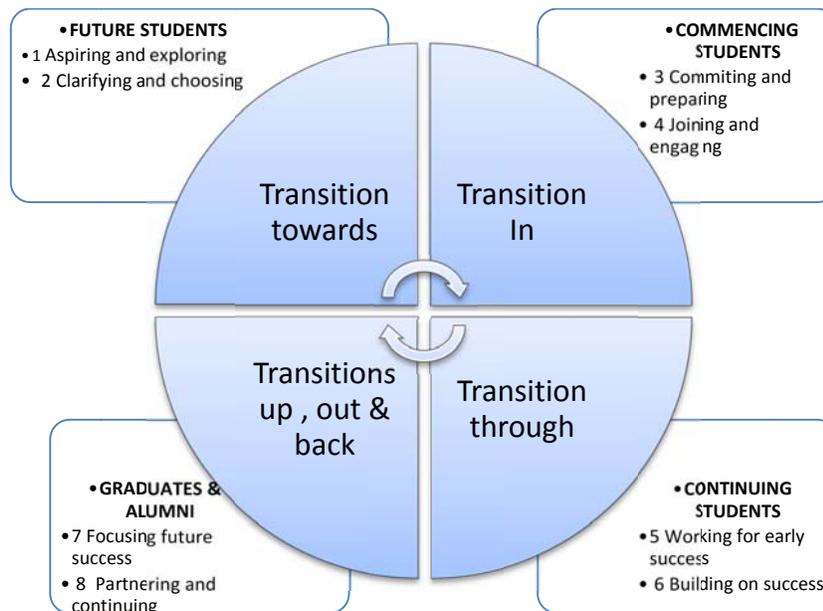


Figure 1 Student Lifecycle Framework

The practical implication of a lifecycle perspective is the understanding that students have different identity-related tasks and needs at different stages, and that this requires a corresponding matching in the design and culture of the learning

environment. For example, while first-years typically work to develop a ‘student identity’, in later years students become increasingly concerned with negotiating their ‘graduate identity’. The process of ‘*identity evolution*’ is reflected in the developing priorities and agendas that students express at different stages, and has obvious implications for our roles as university educators. The simplifying assumption that ‘they are all students’ and that we can relate to them consistently across the years, can result in considerable missed opportunities for enriching the student experience and their success.

Identity Negotiation

Clearly, students are concurrently developing and testing a number of ‘identities’ and as educators, we have a key role to play in this process. Indeed, one of the invisible transactions in our classrooms (with implications for curriculum, assessment and course/program culture) is the process of student identity negotiation, and at times identity conflict. Despite this process being ‘below the waterline,’ it is fundamental to understanding and facilitating student transition across the lifecycle (from induction to outduction). Identity development is a contested space with inherent tensions between:

Ascribed identity: what we allow/tell/position our students to be/become

Habituated identity: what our students expect to be/have become comfortable being

Claimed identity: what our students may wish to be/want to become

Required & encouraged identity: what we know our students will need to be/what the wider and future context requires them to become.

Speaking generically, over time, successful students progressively tend to fade (background) their student identity and develop (foreground) their graduate and professional identity. This is not a co-ordinated process for all students, in fact, like most developmental trajectories, some will display precocious maturity, while others will lag or display arrested development.

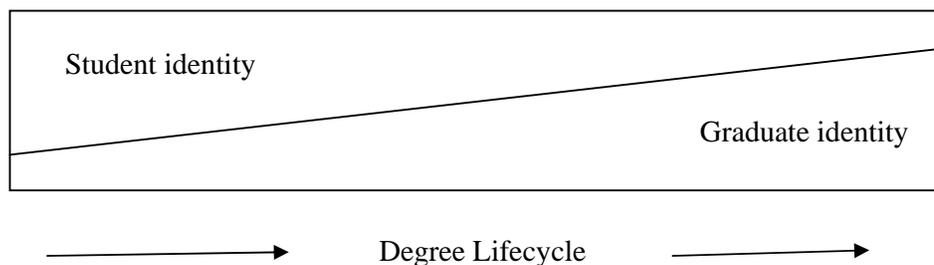


Figure 2: Identity evolution across the lifecycle

This process has fundamental implications for us as educators. In reflecting on the design and culture of our learning environments:

To what extent do we restrict/constrain or expand/stretch our students’ identity assumptions and schemas?

To what extent do we use ‘identity markers’ and ‘developmental progressive tasks’ to enable our students to (using a mixed metaphor) ‘shed their skins’ and ‘grow into their work clothes’.

Are we part of the solution or part of the problem?

There are *general profiles* of identity negotiation that are relatively common in the process of university education. In essence, these describe ‘identity transactions’ between educators and students that are complementary or conflictual and which may have positive or negative consequences for student maturity. Some examples include:

- We *ascribe* a ‘fixed perpetual student identity’ to which students have become comfortably *habituated*. Such complementary (perhaps collusive) expectations produces sub-optimal professional development.
- Students have become *habituated* to traditional sets of educational expectations and we *encourage* them to stretch (deepen and broaden) their development. There is necessary but enlightened developmental tension in this process.
- We *ascribe* a traditional set of educational expectations for our students and they *claim* broader and deeper educational agendas. The developmental tension here results from education being ‘less than’ or ‘different from’ our students sense of their future.
- We *encourage* a broader and deeper educational agenda and our student *claim* the associated identity space. This is the ‘partnership profile’ which produces optimal professional development.

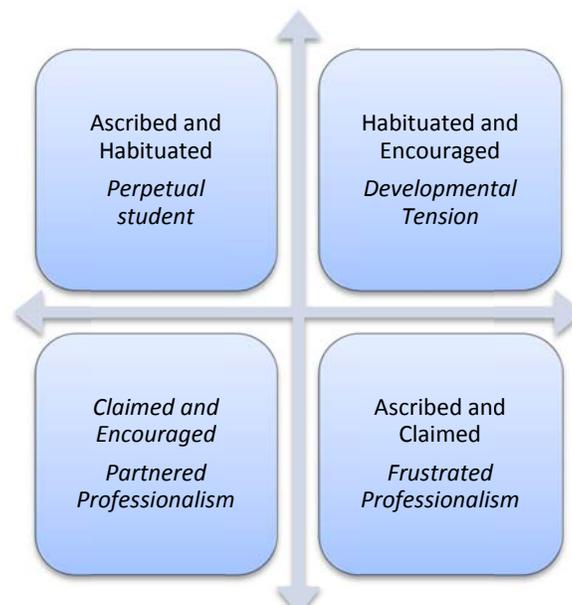


Figure 3: Profiles of identity negotiation in higher education

Next-Generation Partnerships

The necessary foundation for effective identity development is building and growing a suite of *next-generation partnerships or working relationships* which operationalise the values and culture required, not only to stimulate, but also to sustain, professional development. Next-generation partnerships are required at all levels but particularly between:

- Academic and Professional Staff
- Academic Colleagues
- Profession, Employers and Discipline
- Teachers and Students

The argument is that strategic identity development primarily flows from a *conscious repositioning of our working relationships*, and thus a corresponding shift in the educational culture of our programs and courses. The meta-goal of educating for the future requires us to *actively explore different ways for both staff and students to collaborate* (e.g., stretching our ideas of traditional teacher-student relationships and classroom structures and practices); and *colleagues to collaborate* (e.g., moving away from an overly individualised ‘private practice’ model of teaching and course management (my patch) to enhanced collective action and mutual accountability). The latter is particularly important if we are to more equitably share the ‘burden of coherence’ (connecting the dots of our degree programs) and the ‘challenge of integration’ (internalising identity and knowledge structures) with our students. Working in a partnership culture within a lifecycle-informed program design is the educational ideal.

The necessary *value stance* that will help focus and facilitate student progression and maturity through the lifecycle is an explicit and *mutually-accountable learning and relationship contract* with our students. Two key features of this contract are proposed: firstly, being *clearer and more assertive with our students* about what it means to ‘study at Griffith’ and to ‘be a member’ of a degree program at Griffith; and secondly, *positioning students as ‘collaborative partners’* in both their development and in the course management and improvement process. In this sense, ‘*student engagement for responsibility*’ is a key cultural stance in relation to student engagement. As a sidebar, it is instructive and salutatory to note that graduates’ sense of institutional identification and loyalty is a function of their experiences as students. Thus, our alumni strategy is intimately and necessarily connected to our learning and teaching strategy.

So, the general proposition is that the *stage-responsive organisation of relationships and learning task activities* will encourage better engagement and learning, stronger social and academic links between students and students and staff, and produce more satisfied and effective graduates and loyal alumni.

For present purposes, the relevant *general focal questions* are:

To what extent do our program designs and ways of relating to our students facilitate or constrain their identity development, and meet their evolving learning, personal and professional needs?

How might we better partner with our students to produce more effective and satisfying outcomes?

What improvements in valued performance indicators do we hope this will achieve?

Developmental Tasks

While student needs are reasonably complex, and often highly individualised, there is also a reasonably useful ‘general case’ description that can guide our practice across the lifecycle. The *Five-Senses of Success Framework* summarizes one lens through which to view students’ needs and concerns as they progress through their degrees. The framework is derived from interviews with students, is consistent with the literature on student development and, has been shown to be predictive of student satisfaction and outcomes. In summary, the generalised model proposes that ‘identity development’ (Who am I becoming?) is the core organising narrative for students, and that this is associated with a recurring set of *predictable issues and tasks* (capability, purpose, resourcefulness and connection) which change in their substance and salience across the degree program (See Figure 4).

Lifecycle informed program and course design seeks to both respond to, and facilitate, *student maturity*. Thus, for example, in terms of curriculum, learning is conceived as less a sedimentary accumulation of knowledge, and more a designed progression towards mastery. In terms of classroom relationships, as students progress through the degree their expectations of ‘appropriate relating’ evolve, and consequently their perceptions of ‘good teaching’ may require a matching shift in power relations towards the collegial and horizontal. In terms of vocation, students may start with relatively untested aspirations which mature into a sense of purpose, and then into a concern with realistic appraisals of employment opportunities. Similarly, in terms of self-management, students progress, and are expected to progress, in their levels of independence and resilience.

Related to students’ evolving sense of success, is their matching and evolving understanding of the quality of their educational experience. Quality (and the related proxy variable of ‘satisfaction’), has become a ubiquitous, and perhaps overly complicated, term in recent times. From a students’ perspective, a *sense of quality* can be colloquially understood in everyday terms such as: What are we learning? How are we learning? How are we treated? What are we getting? Are we important to you? While there are fundamental and consistent markers of generic quality for students across all years, as they progress through the lifecycle, students also expect, and deserve, recognition of their increased status and maturity. Thus, students’ sense of quality (their *sixth sense* of success) is very much a lifecycle related construct.

The idea that students' *sense of success appropriately changes and matures over their degree lifecycle* presents us with the educational challenge and opportunity to actively facilitate their stage appropriate development, using both curricular and co-curricular modes. In a very real sense, the strategy is based on *partnering with students for success across the lifecycle*. What content and form this next-generation partnering might take will necessarily vary across degree programs. What is required is not a slavish 'one size fits all' strategy, but rather, a commitment, to working in lifecycle responsive and student-centred ways with our students cohorts.

In terms of the *Five Senses of Success* framework, within a lifecycle perspective, the focal questions are:

To what extent do our program designs and ways of relating to, and working with, our students progressively and purposefully facilitate their individual and collective development across the lifecycle of their degrees?

Capability How do we systematically scaffold and stretch our students' sense of efficacy as learners and contributors across the lifecycle? How do we actively support their growth towards not just knowledge acquisition, but professional mastery and proficiency?

Purpose How do we systematically build students' sense of purpose and motivation across the lifecycle? How do we both expand and focus their early aspirations and vocational purposes, and their later confidence and competence in their employability and professional contribution?

Resourcefulness How do we systematically strengthen our students' sense of resourcefulness in managing their transition to university, progressively strengthen their sense of mature independence, and build their resilience as future professionals?

Connection How do we systematically build our students' sense of connection and cohesion with their fellow students and staff and their capacity to form and maintain working relationships? How do we progressively facilitate their sense of connection with a wider future professional network/community? How do we evolve the ways we relate to our students across the lifecycle? How do we enable flexible forms of leadership within our student cohorts?

Identity How do we progressively support our students to evolve a positive sense of identity across the degree lifecycle? How do we progressively legitimate and facilitate our students' confidence and competence in their emerging graduate and professional identities? How do we enable them to mature in their ethical and civic judgements?

Quality How do we systematically partner with our students in improving both the quality of their educational experience and their working relationship with us? How do we appreciate and measure our students evolving notions of a 'quality education'?

A lifecycle-informed program design involves a *coordinated integration of both curricular and co-curricular activities* and a *consistent and mutually-reinforcing set of messages and values*. While the Five Senses framework offers a useful heuristic device and an accessible shared language with students, activities are not restricted to a ‘single sense’ and make contributions to students’ functioning across areas. Table 1 provides a notional example, offered in the spirit of illustration (rather than prescription, restriction or exhaustion) of possible activities at various lifecycle stages.

One of the less tangible, but none the less important, outcomes of a genuinely engaged lifecycle approach is the feeling among both staff and students is that the program hangs together and makes sense in terms of the program structure (design coherence), personal learning journey (personal coherence) and program culture (values coherence). We can think of this as an overarching *sense of coherence*.

At the course level coherence is expressed and experienced through the idea of constructive alignment, the mutually reinforcing relationship between goals, assessment, and teaching and learning practices. A course ‘sings’ when the design elements are in optimal relationship and when there is a match between expectations and experience. Students ‘sing’ when our course designs recognise and work with the relationship between expectations and experience and demands and capacity.

At the degree program level, coherence is expressed and experienced through processes of vertical and horizontal integration and alignment. Horizontal integration is the integration of cross-course or concurrent learning experiences and vertical integration is the integration of consecutive and cumulative learning experiences. Key transition points (particularly entry and graduation) are points in the lifecycle where a sense of coherence is particularly relevant to the student experience.

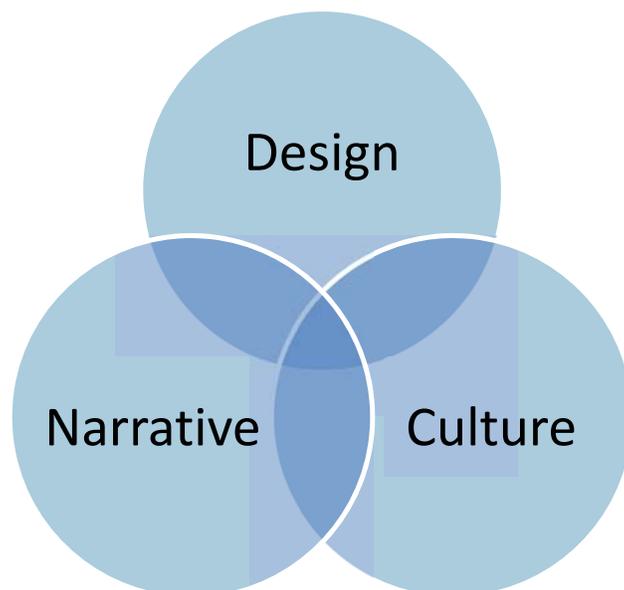


Figure 4: The Triple Helix of Lifecycle Coherence

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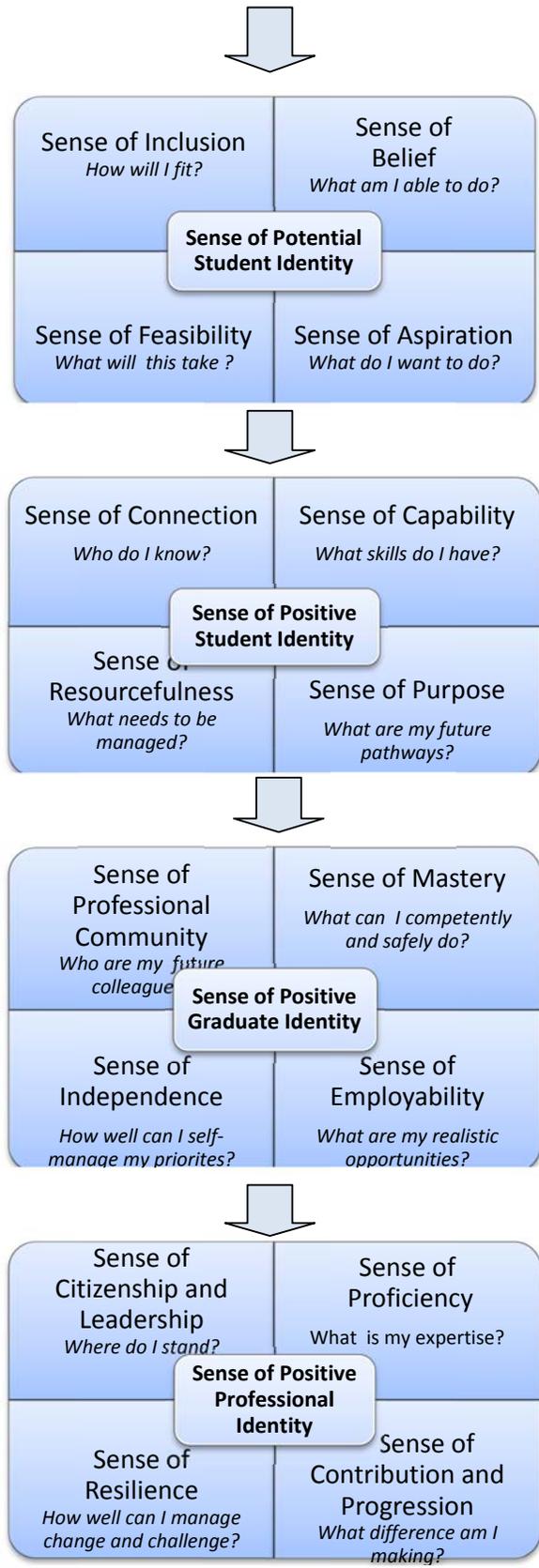
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Table 1 Examples of enabling activities across the student lifecycle

	Future Students	Commencing Students	Continuing Students	Senior Students	Graduates & Postgraduates	Griffith Alumni
Capability <i>How well can I learn in various modes and settings?</i>	Transition enabling programs	Assessment principles Self-assessment rubrics Purposeful feed-forward Articulated threshold concepts	Second-Year Orientation Reflective practice Professional Portfolios	Third-Year Orientation Integrative Capstones Internships	Continuing professional education	Continuing professional education
Purpose <i>What difference do I want to make?</i>	Pathway resources	Career information and role models Authentic assessment	Service learning and volunteering	Networking Career Workshops	Leadership roles	Invitation and contribution
Resourcefulness <i>How well can I manage change and challenge? How well can I survive and thrive?</i>	Transition enabling programs	Scaffolded course design principles Help-seeking education Facilitating self-regulation Study-work-life balance	Healthy behaviours physical and mental	Resilience and well-being	Work-life balance	Mentoring
Connection <i>How well can I form and maintain working relationships?</i>	Transition enabling programs	Formative group work Small-class community building Social networking tools Student organisations	Project-based learning	Mentoring opportunities	Mentoring opportunities	Projects and opportunities register
Identity <i>Who am I? What are my values and standards?</i>	Transition enabling programs	Program-level narrative and alignment Course-level contracting Portfolio development	Induction and contracting Self-leadership	Induction and contracting Leadership opportunities	Invitation and contribution	Invitation and contribution
Quality <i>What are my perceptions of how well things are being done? What is my contribution to doing things better?</i>	Data-based orientation	Program-level Early-cohort review and engagement Course-level quality processes Student participation in governance Cohort profiling	Mid-cohort review and engagement	End-cohort review and closure ritual	Newsletter and ongoing contact	Invitation and contribution

