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An approach to supporting academically fragile students in  
higher education**

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# **In pursuit of a healthy academic status and student experience: An approach to supporting academically fragile students in higher education**

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## **Abstract**

Student engagement in higher education institutions is a critical constituent that underpins organisational retention and the student experience. This study investigates the effectiveness of a four-step initiative designed to support academically fragile teacher education students at a regional Australian university. The initiative was framed upon behaviour change and goal setting frameworks designed to facilitate academic re-engagement at an individual level, guided by academic teacher education staff. Descriptions of four teacher education students and their re-engagement experiences during exposure to the initiative for a semester period are provided. Findings indicate that the elements of a structured and personalised approach, mutual agreement between academic staff and students towards study commitment, and regular communication with the students were fundamental in maintaining engagement. Three of the four students highlighted in this study completed the semester and experienced academic success that they had not achieved previously, suggesting that the initiative may hold value as an approach towards students academically vulnerable. The researchers discuss the multidimensionality of challenges associated with student engagement, identify possible implications of these, and make recommendations for strategies to address such challenges.

## **Introduction**

The modern-day student studying in higher education encounters multiple challenges and opportunities in pursuit of a degree qualification and pending professional career. Full-time or part-time employment, parental obligations, flexible learning options, and the capacity to study for a full calendar year are some of the requirements common to many students currently studying at a tertiary level (Womack, Leuty, Bullock-Yowell, and Mandracchia, 2018). Immersed within the challenges and opportunities that university students encounter is the concept of engagement, a principle of conduct that underpins a student's progress and trajectory throughout the study journey and dictates the likelihood of any student achieving their goal of graduating with a degree qualification (Quaye, Harper, and Pendakur, 2020; Chipchase et al., 2017; Svanum and Bigatti, 2009). In the current academic climate, the capacity for students to seek and maintain a level of engagement that contributes to progress and success appears to be increasingly challenged and interrupted by the combination of multiple characteristics that create distraction. Moreover, the capacity of students to compartmentalise and manage the multiple commitments that occupy their daily lives

has a major impact on engagement, and if not managed appropriately, leads to disengagement with their studies.

Engagement is the central element to student learning, satisfaction, and trajectory through a course of study (Gray and Diloreto, 2016). Numerous descriptions of engagement exist within relevant literature and commonly highlight terms such as 'psychological investment in learning', 'direction of effort, energy, resources, and time', and 'understanding and mastering the knowledge and skills of academic work' (Krause, 2005; Newmann, Wehlage, and Lambron, 1992). Martin and Torres (2016) describe student engagement as meaningful interaction throughout the learning environment, proposing that it is a function of both the individual and the construct. Students who are engaged are more likely to perform well as participants in learning (Brady, 2004), feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, feel safe within the learning environment, and develop habits that prepare them for continuous life-long learning (Chen, Gonyea, and Kuh, 2008). Furthermore, student engagement is increasingly viewed as a key factor in addressing academic problems such as low achievement, boredom, and alienation, as well as high dropout rates (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004). Within the higher education environment there are expectations recommending that students engage weekly (or on a regular basis with the curriculum materials), and that students will be responsible for their own learning (Cook-Sather, 2010). Notwithstanding, there are many students who do manage their time and engage effectively by compartmentalising and prioritising their commitments, however the propensity for students to battle with managing their multiple obligations is growing. Consequently, evidence of disengagement often cultivates and snowballs into temporary or permanent dropout, thus retention and attrition of students has gained much attention. This is evidenced by a longitudinal study investigating 186 undergraduate university students and their adaptability to change, academic and behavioural engagement, and degree completion (Holliman, Martin, and Collie, 2018). Findings indicated that the ability of students to be adaptable predicted positive engagement through persistence, planning, and task management, whereas an inability to be adaptable predicted negative engagement through self-handicapping, disengagement, and non-completion.

From an institutional, professional, and economic perspective it would be superlative if all students who commenced higher education study completed their commitment, but due to several causes or motives this is not the reality. In 2010, costs of student attrition in Australian higher education for domestic students were reported to be \$1.4 billion annually (Adams, Banks, and Dickson, 2010). Thus, attrition has an economic impact in Australia. Beyond this, students not successfully completing a course of study and not graduating contributes to fewer early career professionals entering careers which are in need, such as the teaching profession. For instance, Wilson (2020) reported in *Profession at Risk* that one in two pre-service teachers do not complete their studies within six years, with the number of students accepted into Education courses with Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) scores lower than 50 growing fivefold within the past decade. Possible causes or motives for disengagement that potentially lead to dropout are diverse and specific to individual students, but factors such as physical or mental health issues and financial pressures (HESP, 2017; TEQSA, 2017), academic failure (Li and Carroll, 2017), stress (SRC, 2018), and external pressures such as 'too much going on in life' (Zepke, Leach, and Prebble, 2005) are commonly stated. With rates of student attrition increasing in higher education, progressively the expectations placed upon universities to examine the

approaches and initiatives utilised to establish and maintain engagement, with the intended outcome to reduce attrition, are at an all-time high.

Tinto (2017) highlights the importance of motivation to persist in the face of academic struggles and in degree completion, a characteristic underpinned by self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perceived value of the curriculum. A sense of purpose, self-belief, and self-determination contribute significantly to defining a student's intrinsic motivation to learn (Ryan and Mercer, 2012), with higher motivation levels leading to greater conceptual understanding, flexibility in problem solving, more efficient learning, a stronger sense of social responsibility and personal worth (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan, 1991). Furthermore, student motivation can be influenced by feelings of connectedness that extend from collaboration within social, academic, and professional spheres of a university community (Lane et al., 2019). Cumulatively, it is evident that there are multiple factors that interact and ultimately have varying levels of influence on student experience, motivation, engagement, and disengagement. Thus, expectations for universities to understand the problem of attrition is multidimensional and complex. Against this background, designing and implementing programs, initiatives, or interventions to address student disengagement demands strategic and holistic approaches across an institution.

The purpose of this study was to articulate a structured and directed initiative used with disengaged undergraduate Education students studying at a regional Australian university. The students were identified through a university-wide process known as Academic Progress Review (APR), and subsequently through this process were recognised as susceptible to dropout. From an institutional, professional, and economic perspective these students are the most vulnerable and potentially the most in need of support. For this study, these students were identified as 'academically fragile', a term used by academic staff only to describe the critical status they are positioned in relevant to a degree study plan and academic future. An academically fragile student in this context was characterised as depicted by either, i) failing 50 per cent or more of enrolled units from the previous semester of study; ii) repeat unsuccessful attempts at one or more units; and iii) a history of poor academic performance in successive semesters or throughout the study journey. Students who fail may be portrayed as at fault and in deficit (Devlin, 2013), have failure attributed to some aspect of their nature (Orr, 2007) and be subject to marginalisation, thus motivation and self-efficacy is negatively impacted, and capacity to persist is dented. This study will report on the effectiveness of the initiative to achieve the goal of supporting identified students to return to a healthy academic status and be removed from the APR process. The perspectives of four student who took part in the initiative are presented.

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## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were four current students undertaking higher education study at a regional Australian university in 2019. This sample size was selected framed upon the notion of information power recognised by Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) who identified principles of study aim, sample specificity, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy as underpinning principles for qualitative research. Following

semester two 2018, these students were notified through the institutional APR that based on their unit results from second semester 2018 they were identified as academically fragile. This process of identification for these students studying within the School of Education resulted in automatic inclusion in a targeted re-engagement initiative designed to guide and support each of them towards good academic standing into the future. The four students were undertaking study of different courses within the School of Education and were all in different stages of their respective courses. For the purpose of anonymity these four students are identified using pseudonyms. The details of the students were:

Student A: Rosie, a second year Masters' student studying part-time through blended learning approach (combination of online and face-to-face). Single parent to a teenage daughter, early 40s, not employed.

Student B: Helen, a second year Bachelor student studying full-time through blended learning approach. Relocated from a remote region, first in family to enter university. Employed part-time, early 20s.

Student C: Melanie, a third year Bachelor student studying full-time blended learning approach. Employed part-time with two jobs and involved with voluntary work, early 20s, first in family to enter university. Has consistently struggled academically since second semester of first year.

Student D: Toni, a second year Education pathway student studying part-time through online learning. Employed part-time with two jobs, early 20s. Has a Learning Access Plan (academic support provided due to chronic health conditions) and has consistently struggled academically from previous General Studies program two years prior.

### *Process*

A designated role within the School of Education is the *Director of Student Engagement* (DOSE). This role is occupied by an academic staff member from the School of Education, with one of the key responsibilities of the role being to work with students identified as academically fragile. More specifically the role entails communicating with students who are at risk of dropout, further de-escalating their academic progress, or lost and uncertain regarding their decision to pursue studying Education and to persist with their studies. Effectively the DOSE holds the responsibility of being the first point of contact for these students once they have been identified as academically fragile through the APR process, and serves to provide support, guidance, resources, while endeavouring to maintain regular contact with the students for a minimum period of one semester.

In January 2019, the DOSE commenced implementation of a four-step re-engagement initiative designed to facilitate academically fragile Education students returning to good academic standing. During this time, a list of 40 Education students from across seven courses were identified as academically fragile, and thus the DOSE and an academic colleague attempted to communicate with each of these students between January 7 and February 22, 2019.

### *Initiative*

The re-engagement initiative was framed upon a four-step process which is underpinned by multiple theoretical frameworks. Step One involved attempting to contact the identified students through email communication that was personalised and sent from the DOSE. The decision for the contact by the DOSE was based upon the work in higher education of Hagenauer and Volet (2014), who acknowledged the importance of positive teacher-student relationships through a familiarity with relevant courses, thus enabling strong affective and supportive bonds based on care and understanding. The students were encouraged to respond to the email and were requested to do so within a maximum timeframe of three weeks. The email was framed positively in the sense that it was directed towards providing support and resources for guiding the students back towards good academic standing, and strategically diverted from emphasising the precarious academic position that students held. The rationale for the tone of the email communication was to assure students that they would be supported in a time of need, provide them with a sense of belonging to the School of Education, and to inspire a level of hope that they can return to good academic standing and adherence to their course of study (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, and Harwood, 2016). If students did not respond to the email communication after the three-week timeframe, the academic staff member then attempted to contact them through phone communication. If there was no response by phone from students after a two-week period a final attempt to contact them through Short Message Service (SMS) was tried. Effectively, the desired outcome from Step One was that the identified students responded to the communication delivered to them.

Step Two of the initiative involved direct and personal one-on-one communication with the academically fragile students through either a face-to-face, Skype, or phone scheduled meeting. For Step Two to occur, evidence of a student response at Step One must have happened. Again, the foundations of the meeting were framed positively, supportively, openly, and honestly; however, interaction was professional and an expectation of commitment from the students to improve was communicated from the DOSE. The meeting had several purposes; i) to provide each student with an opportunity to explain what they believed contributed to them being in the current academic position; ii) to gauge what each student believed they were capable of for the upcoming semester in terms of study load, prioritise and manage commitments, identification of study-averse behaviours and habits, and motivation towards study for the upcoming semester and beyond; iii) discussing approaches to behaviour change, and iv) to mutually establish key fundamentals that underpin an individual study plan that each student has one week to develop following this meeting. The focus of the meeting was for the DOSE to assess where each student was situated in relation to their sense of belonging and connectedness (Strayhorn, 2016; Tinto, 2010), self-efficacy (Bartimote-Aufflick, Bridgeman, Walker, Sharma, and Smith, 2016), professional identity (Lane et al., 2019), willingness to persist (Tinto, 2017), and motivation to succeed. Following this meeting the DOSE referred to the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983) to categorise what stage of change each student was at relevant to their current mindset and future study (pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, relapse: see Figure 1). This categorisation allowed for the DOSE to establish a starting

point for each student prior to the commencement of the semester, and then make a comparative categorisation for each student at the conclusion of the semester period.

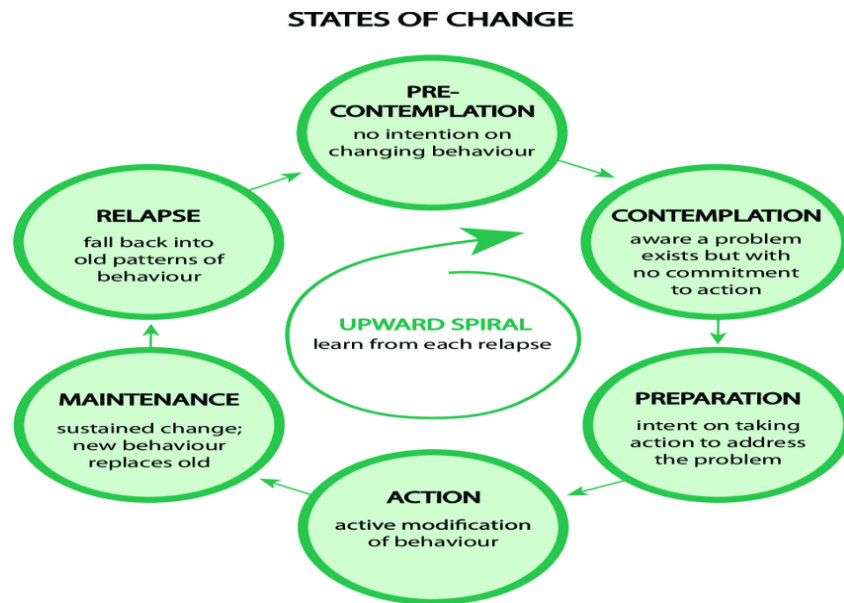


Figure 1: Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change

Step Three of the initiative is undertaken once Step Two is complete and is critical in recognising the significance of the academic situation and creating a sense of hope that improving this is possible. Aljawi, Dracup, Zacharias, Bennett, and Boud (2020) suggest that much of the student engagement and attrition work that universities undertake is captured from the perspective of the institution, and not enough is taken from the perspective of its students. Step Three of the initiative is grounded in the notion that university students, being adults, must take responsibility for how they engage in learning, how they prepare for learning, and have an obligation to be accountable to these. For Step Three each academically fragile student must prepare an individualised study plan that specifies and visually details how they will schedule and dedicate their time weekly for the upcoming semester (see Appendix One for sample study plan). It is expected that these study plans incorporate a commitment to study, employment commitment if applicable, family commitments such as caring for children/parents/partner, and other factors such as sport. The DOSE provided each student with a sample template and a sample study plan from an anonymous student to use as a guide. Each student was required to prepare and return their own study plan to the DOSE no later than one week after the meeting outlined in Step Two. Upon returning their study plan to the DOSE, each student is requested to print a copy of their plan and place it in a location where they can view it daily as a reminder. Similarly, the DOSE can use the plan as a point of reference throughout the semester, thus the study plan presents a form of accountability to monitor and motivate study adherence. Student accountability relates to compliance and adherence to what is prescribed or being asked of, to act in response and to take the initiative to act based on one's sense of connection and answerability to themselves and others (Cook-Sather, 2010). To guide the development of a study plan and related accountability, the DOSE specified that preparing and designing of this should be grounded in goal setting principles, namely through the SMARTER model (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-dependent, Engaging, Rewarding; MacLeod, 2012).

Step Four of the initiative was only implemented if the aforementioned steps were completed successfully. The objective of Step Four was to monitor the direction, progress, and trajectory of each academically fragile student across the duration of the upcoming semester. The value of regular monitoring and follow up after into initial contact and support is recognised by interventions aiming to address student engagement and attrition in higher education (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, and Goodwin, 1998). The monitoring was administered utilising one or more of four different methods executed by the DOSE or School of Education academic staff member nominated by the DOSE. The methods were: i) regular face-to-face meetings between the student and the DOSE or School of Education academic (e.g., every three to four weeks), ii) regular phone discussions between the student and School of Education academic (e.g., every three to four weeks), iii) contacting the unit coordinators of the units that each student is enrolled in to obtain an update of how they are attending, engaging, and performing, and iv) DOSE required to communicate with a student due to not upholding their commitment to their study plan and failing to communicate this independently. These methods were adopted to maintain student accountability, align with the SMARTER model (MacLeod, 2012) used to frame the study plan, and to further build professional relationships between the students and the School of Education staff team.

Table 1: Overview of re-engagement initiative sequential steps, step focus, and timepoint during a semester.

<b>Re-engagement Initiative</b>	<b>Specific Focus</b>	<b>Semester Timepoint</b>
Step One	Making contact with student and establishing a scheduled meeting	Ideally between four and six weeks prior to the commencement of semester
Step Two	Meet or speak with the student, develop understanding of individual context, mutually agree on direction for the semester	Ideally between one to two weeks prior to the commencement of semester, can be up to two weeks into the semester
Step Three	Development of individual study plan that is mutually agreed upon and shared; structure, accountability, and support	No later than the commencement of Week Five of semester.
Step Four	Regular monitoring of student progress through a combination of periodic meetings, discussions, and contact with relevant Unit Coordinators	A minimum of three monitoring check-ins across the duration of the semester.

### *Interviews and Case Studies*



In July 2019, four School of Education students identified as academically fragile prior to semester one 2019 were interviewed over the telephone by a regional Australian university professional staff member. The interview was scheduled for a maximum of one hour. The staff member was a project officer for a larger university research project investigating institution-wide attrition and approaches to retention, with the initiative implemented in the present study forming part of that project (ethics # H0017932). The staff member was not known to the participants in this study. The participants provided consent to be interviewed and for the interviews to be recorded. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain the perceptions of students about their lived experiences when in an academically fragile position, about the impact and perceived value of academic support through exposure to the re-engagement initiative, and about their views relevant to higher education study into the future.

A case study approach was utilised for this study to capture the subjective experiences and concomitant meanings of these for each of the students. The methodological approach fosters an interpretative paradigm that emphasises individual perspectives on the investigation of the re-engagement initiative and the inherent processes within it (Starman, 2013). According to Yin (2017) case studies generate and evolve over time, often as a series of events that occur at a particular time and in a particular place or environment. Against this background, each of the student participant perspectives from semester one, 2019 were detailed in relation to the effectiveness of the initiative to provide support, direction, and facilitate an individualised path towards good academic standing.

## Findings

Interviews of the four student participants did not adhere to a particular interview structure. However, they were framed around individual perspectives and experiences relating to challenges and barriers to effective and successful study, prioritising commitments, strategies employed to adhere to study requirements and expectations, and behaviours exhibited when progress was halted. In addition, discussion centred upon support provided by the DOSE throughout semester one, 2019 and any influence that being exposed to the re-engagement initiative had.

### *Student A*

Upon commencing studying a Master of Teaching in 2017, Rosie had difficulty managing a full-time study load, and consequently did not achieve a pass grade in four out of eight units. Following this time, she reduced her study load to part-time which led to increased success in relation to passing more units, however a need for additional support was identified to facilitate the student through second attempts at units and to progress through the degree. Several of the challenges that this student encountered during 2018 extended from both parents being unwell, not having employment and thus relying on Centrelink payments, and being a single parent to a teenage daughter. Rosie indicated that the primary reasons she consistently had academic difficulty were from being a full-time parent and lacking a structured strategic approach to managing her study. It was evident during the interview that this student lacked motivation to actively engage in study due to not being organised on a weekly basis, typically commencing important tasks and assessment items close to due dates,

and at times missing weekly content and readings. The student commented that this behaviour appeared to have an accumulating effect whereby requirements from multiple units were not met, requests for extensions became common, and submitted assessment was not always produced to the quality or standard that she was capable of. After an initial meeting with the DOSE, Rosie realised that to avoid any reoccurrence of these habits that she needed guidance and accountability, thus an individualised study plan was developed and a plan of regular monthly contact between the DOSE and the student was agreed upon.

Rosie communicated that an awareness of the study habits she had developed needed to be changed, and subsequently she welcomed assistance and support. Following the development of her own study plan and communication of this with the DOSE, mutual agreement was reached between both parties, leading to a sense of purpose and direction, intrinsic motivation, and professional identity for the student (Brophy, 1998). Part of the mutual agreement incorporated the DOSE making phone contact with Rosie at four regular time points throughout the semester to 'check in' regarding academic progress, state of wellbeing (mental, emotional, social, and physical), an update on behaviour changes towards study, and to obtain an overall understanding of how she was managing perceived challenges. Rosie commented in the interview that the DOSE:

*allowed me to sound off about what I was having trouble with and what was frustrating me; it was nice that a staff member showed interest in me and also keep an eye on me.*

She regularly communicated dissatisfaction with online communication as part of unit requirements, along with inconsistency in how Unit Coordinators engaged with online requirements. In addition, there was a particular time during the latter stages of the semester when Rosie was having difficulty managing multiple assessment tasks, had fallen behind with one unit in terms of weekly engagement, and was dealing with some personal issues. A check in phone conversation with the DOSE provided an opportunity for the student to vent, after which time she was able to work through the assessment tasks and eventually get unit weekly content under control.

At the conclusion of semester one, 2019, Rosie successfully passed all units she was enrolled in. Since that time, she continued progressing positively for semester two 2019, and was due to graduate at the end of 2020.

### *Student B*

In 2015 Helen relocated from a small remote town as the first in her family to commence studying a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education degree. Transitioning into first year resulted in successfully passing five out of eight units; however, 2016 and 2017 were less successful with a total of ten units not passed. In 2018, Helen was advised by a university Student Adviser to reduce her study load which did lead to more units successfully passed, but a clear need for support was recognised after semester two, 2018. In the interview with this student, it was observable through both verbal and non-verbal interpersonal communication that she was uncertain, uneasy, lacked self-confidence, felt anxious, felt uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassed about the academic situation she was in. What became clearer in her responses to questions was that this student had little awareness of methods or approaches that

could be implemented to help with her academic situation, but admitted that she needed full support and guidance with the intention to inspire, rejuvenate her study pathway, instil self-confidence, and to raise self-esteem. It was evident that through experiencing a lack of academic success and progress that this student was immersed in the notion of 'failure' (Devlin, 2013; Orr, 2007), with the impact of this enticing her to believe that was exactly what she was. The student recalled that after her first meeting with the DOSE it was agreed that for any progress to be made, she would have to take some responsibility in providing a lifestyle plan that included a study plan. Within the study plan two requests were specified by the DOSE; i) the student must identify three goals that she wanted to achieve for semester one 2019, and ii) the student must communicate and demonstrate that she was motivated towards improving her academic conduct and performance. If the student was able to produce a lifestyle plan and identify these goals, then the DOSE believed that behaviour change could occur.

Throughout the duration of the interview Helen repeatedly referred to emotional and mental health issues that impacted her capacity to study effectively, yet there was no formal diagnosis. A comment made by the student reinforced this, stating "I knew that University would be academically challenging, but I was not expecting it to be so mentally and emotionally draining". Nevertheless, a lifestyle plan including a detailed study plan was produced along with signs of interest and motivation. Helen added,

*I had some personal issues, but coming up with the study plan really did help; if it was not for that and being able to interact with a staff member face-to-face, I probably wouldn't be continuing my study now.*

The study plan incorporated face-to-face meetings with the DOSE every three weeks to ensure that the student was managing study and external commitments effectively, but equally to monitor the student's state of wellbeing and to assist with any relapse of disengagement. Helen suggested that over the course of the semester she tended to revert into three habits which had a detrimental effect on academic performance and subsequently the level of engagement. These were, i) not having a balanced approach to study and external activities such as employment and social activity, ii) an inability to maintain a regular sleep pattern and procrastinating, particularly during times when academic commitments were high, and iii) not communicating and 'remaining silent' or 'hiding away' in times when support, guidance, and understanding was most needed. In her meetings with the DOSE much time and discussion were dedicated to these habits, along with discussing strategies that could be utilised to prevent relapse and change behaviour.

A positive outcome for Helen from semester one, 2019 was that for the first time in her university journey she had passed all units she was enrolled in. The student did express that as the semester progressed, she did slowly build some self-confidence, feelings of self-worth, and belief that she could achieve success at University. During the semester, the student sought support and advice from a student counsellor on the recommendation of the DOSE at an identified time of need. Following semester one Helen was no longer identified as academically fragile.

### *Student C*

Prior to the interview the interviewer was provided background information from a Student Adviser about Melanie. Since semester two, 2015 Melanie had difficulty sustaining academic engagement. Unfortunately, and disappointingly, this had been despite repeated efforts from institutional student counsellors, student advisers, and the DOSE to provide continuous and extended support and guidance consistently over a four-year period. At the conclusion of 2018, this student had been up for academic exclusion on two occasions, and for all other semesters was prescribed a level of institutional support due to poor academic engagement, performance, and conduct. Along her academic journey Melanie often defaulted to adopting a stance of resistance, removed herself from assuming any responsibility or accountability for her academic status, placed blame on academic staff for why she disengaged, and irrationally believed that she already possessed professional skills and expertise in the education field. Previously multiple School of Education academic staff questioned the legitimacy of this student selecting Education as a career choice due to her lack of participation, lack of engagement, non-submission of assessment tasks, and reluctance to seek or accept assistance.

The interview commenced with Melanie by indicating that her tutoring employment, volunteer firefighting obligations, voluntary work at a Primary School and administrative role with a sports club were keeping her busily occupied and she was not feeling great about repeating three units for semester one. Immediately it was evident that prioritising study was not a focus. Melanie then spoke to several points of frustration that she had with the course, such as online discussion boards, inconsistencies with lectures and tutorials, webinars, lack of face-to-face opportunities and communication with staff, and content not being representative of the teaching profession. As the meeting endured and efforts to communicate about her future in terms of adhering to study and achieving favourable outcomes at university, it became increasingly clear that the student was not interested in this, or in being helped. It was clear that through her default behaviour of blaming others, removing herself from any responsibility or accountability, and claiming educational expertise, she appeared to be shielding her own personal insecurities, her lack of success, and enhance her self-esteem (Brophy, 1998). She commented that in the one meeting she had with the DOSE that he encouraged her to develop an individualised study plan, “but I did not see any value in that or think that I needed to share one with him”. Furthermore, Melanie believed that despite multiple attempts by various institutional support staff and mechanisms that none of these worked for her, but simultaneously gave the impression that she warranted such services.

Throughout the interview Melanie spoke unprompted and openly about personal characteristics and behaviours that contributed to her disengagement. For example, “my attention is shocking; if I am not engaged or motivated then I am gone. I will give it about thirty seconds, but sometimes if I am listening to an online lecture it can take up to two weeks because I will stop and start all of the time”. Furthermore, in relation to her tutoring employment,

*I work as a tutor and if I cannot be there then the children do not get taught. That is the most important thing to me, so if I am not available for the university classes due to tutoring then that is just the way it is.*

From the three units in which she had enrolled for semester one none of these were passed, with the same outcome for two units in semester two and one unit in Spring School. The student did not return to study Education in 2020.

### *Student D*

Toni entered a Bachelor of General Studies (Education Pathway) in 2016 with the intention of progressing into the Bachelor of Education Primary degree. Pathway programs are offered to commencing students who do not meet the pre-requisite requirements such as entry score (ATAR) or demonstrated qualifications and employment experience if deemed mature age. In terms of academic performance across 2016 and 2017, Toni fluctuated between semesters; for instance, evidence of Credit, Distinction, and High Distinction unit results were interspersed with several units not passed through failing or enrolment withdrawal. From eight units attempted in 2018, three were not passed and five were withdrawn from, effectively meaning that the entire year was futile from an academic standpoint. At the end of 2018, Toni met the DOSE in person by serving on a School of Education panel where he was reviewing student appeals to academic exclusion. During the academic exclusion meeting, it was evident that the student was dyslexic and impacted by a genetic auditory impairment, subject to experiencing fluctuating levels of motivation, had previously demonstrated a lack of organisation and a structured approach to study, tended to procrastinate and delay starting important tasks too close to the submission date, and was employed in two jobs while studying. In January 2019, regular communication commenced between Toni and the DOSE through email, phone, and face-to-face meetings, with foci being to encourage the student to maximise the support and resources offered to her and to instigate individual responsibility to create positive behaviour change towards management of time and approach to study.

During the interview Toni expressed positive outcomes from regular three-weekly communication with the DOSE. Specifically, she found that she was able to be honest, able to openly share her thoughts, feelings, and perspective, and acknowledge her pitfalls in relation to achieving success as a university student. Despite these benefits, the student indicated that she had little to no knowledge or understanding of how to improve approaches to time management, approaches to weekly scheduling and academic organisation, and overall behaviour change. Furthermore, after communication with an institutional Disability Services Coordinator the message was reinforced that more than ample support, services, and resources had been provided to Toni over the period of her study journey, yet habitually there was a reluctance to engage with these and take advantage of what was being offered; rather an expectation that these were automatically provided. The student did prepare a study plan and a weekly assessment planner and was able to provide regular updates of academic progress throughout the semester to the DOSE. Beyond this, the student was able to articulate clearly that her primary goal was to perform well in the Education Pathway program so that she could enter the bachelor's degree of study and work towards her dream of becoming a teacher. The identification of this goal provided a source of revitalisation and motivation for Toni, which she communicated was reassuring for her.

Toni revealed that she continued to find difficulty in working to a schedule and related structure, in breaking the habit of commencing important tasks close to submission date, sustaining focus, and avoiding distractions, and in establishing consistent behaviour change. She commented, "I have never been one to ask for help". Such a comment does stipulate the mindset adopted and potentially a shortcoming of her approach to seeking success. At the conclusion of semester one, 2019 Toni successfully passed four out of five units attempted for that year, demonstrating a level of accomplishment that she had not previously, and promise for the 2020 academic year. Key points that Toni did reiterate several times during the interview reflected the value of regular communication and insisting on persistence in both favourable and demanding times.

## **Discussion**

The aim of study was to report on the effectiveness of a structured student re-engagement initiative on the engagement of four university students, and to present case studies of the four students who took part in the initiative. According to Good, Wiley, and Florez (2009) one way to describe effectiveness in terms of teaching practice is the ability to improve student outcomes as shown by research. Based on this description the initiative examined in this study could be rated as moderately effective in relation to re-engaging academically fragile students over a short-term period. Three of the four students were able to remain engaged and successfully complete the academic requirements of the units they were enrolled in, and importantly continued studying in their selected teacher education course. From the student case studies there were multiple learnings that can be drawn from these experiences to inform future approaches to student engagement.

It was evident that Rosie, Helen, Melanie, and Toni all experienced fluctuating levels of motivation towards engaging with study, but for the majority of the 13-week semester their motivation was low. Typically, Rosie, Helen, and Toni approached the semester with levels of uncertainty, caution, and concern rather than focus and motivated direction, although after working with the DOSE to establish clear mutual direction and a structured study plan, levels of motivation were temporarily restored. This demonstrates the importance and value of preparing a personalised structured study plan mutually with students to establish direction, foster motivation, and embed a mindset of possibility and achievement (Holliman, Martin, and Collie, 2018). During a period of the second half of semester (often between weeks 8 to 12) each of the four students appeared to experience a major shift in motivation, highlighted by substantial drops in motivation, students questioning their capacity to manage, and in some cases questioning the value in continuing (Tinto, 2017; Ryan and Mercer, 2012). What was representative of the four students during this point in time was that communication with the DOSE tapered off or even ceased, often during times when it was agreed between the students and the DOSE that communication should occur. A worthwhile lesson that can be learnt from these experiences is that students who find themselves in an academically fragile and vulnerable position need to be communicated with regularly; often this must be organised and executed by the academic or professional support staff supporting these students (Devlin, 2013; Orr, 2007). Crucially, communication at key timepoints during the semester such as when multiple assessment tasks are being undertaken is reflective of this (Devlin, 2013; Orr, 2007).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that any student who is academically fragile can often remove themselves, become isolated, and disengage from both academic commitments and attempts of communication. Melanie was a definitive example of this.

Interviews revealed responses characteristic of students with limited self-belief, low self-esteem, and a distinct lack of confidence through both verbal and non-verbal communication, particularly Helen and Toni. This behaviour was also apparent in communication with the DOSE, with some instances reflective of students convinced that they did not belong at university, were not capable of being successful at university, or could not redeem themselves from the position they were in. The DOSE and other Education academic colleague dedicated regular time throughout the semester communicating with Rosie, Helen, and Toni reassuring them that they were capable of performing well if they adhered to their study plan and engaged with unit content consistently on a weekly basis. A primary focus of this communication involved positively reinforcing small wins or milestones such as keeping on top of unit content, preparing a plan for a major assessment task, or passing an early stakes assessment task. Furthermore, regular communication allowed student progress to be monitored, the notion of accountability of students to be emphasised, and for any possible relapse towards disengagement to be identified (Cook-Sather, 2010). In principle words of encouragement, positive reinforcement, and assurance functioned to keep students motivated, maintain energy and momentum during known ‘busier’ times during semester, and to assure the students that they are in fact capable of achieving positive outcomes (Lane et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017). Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for academically fragile students to ignore communication attempts, avoid providing progress updates, and to not engage with mutually agreed study plan commitments. Again, Melanie rarely responded to numerous contact attempts with her despite consistent efforts, and when contact was made successfully, she provided comments to the effect of not being supported or communicated with by the university. Disappointingly, this feedback provides insight into the realities of trying to work with and support academically fragile students who do not believe they need help and neglect the responsibilities of an engaged student.

Two of the predominant reasons that students disengage relate to an inability to compartmentalise multiple obligations and to prioritise these multiple obligations (Wilson, 2020; Tinto, 2017; MacLeod, 2012; Zepke and Leach, 2010). Arguably the most challenging aspect for each of the students in this study to progress positively was reflective of difficulties with compartmentalising their respective obligations and prioritising these. In an attempt to reduce the propensity of students disengaging due to inability to compartmentalise and prioritise, the re-engagement initiative embedded a student-led goal setting framework individualised to each student based on the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983). This approach was incorporated to accommodate a personalised approach unique to each student, to provide challenge while establishing a supported mindset, to foster achievement, but to remain realistic based on student academic history. This underpinning theoretical foundation enabled the establishment of a starting point at the commencement of semester, guidelines and milestones during the semester, and direction for comparison against projected outcomes at the conclusion of semester.

## Conclusion

The four case studies presented in this study provide evidence of the unique, diverse, and individual challenges that many students encounter when undertaking higher education study. Multiple challenges and factors exist that can both restrict and assist student progress; however, how each student manages these appears to be distinctive. With any approach to student engagement there is no evidence to suggest that “one size fits all”; a mantra supported by the researchers of this study grounded upon the student experiences provided and associated outcomes. Nevertheless, the current initiative adopted to support students identified as academically fragile to progress positively towards a healthy academic status may have contributed to the re-engagement of three out of four students. Moreover, the initiative may have contributed to the consolidation of one student eventually attriting from university who had been disengaged for the duration of her time as a student. Based on the students in this study these foundation findings offer promise and warrant further exploration.

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