

# INSIGHT IN STUDENT SUCCESS

The HUGS-model for innovation and  
evaluation in higher education



# INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have seen an increase in pressure on students. Growing dropout rates, stress, mental complaints and overall dissatisfaction indicate that something is seriously going wrong. At the same time, more and more resources have been allocated to improve the quality of higher education. There are various ways to support and stimulate students from different angles, we see hopeful movements emerging. However, it remains difficult to get a grip on the factors that contribute to happy, connected and educated professionals. What should we do if we do not know where to start?

A few years ago, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, decided to dedicate part of its quality funds ('kwaliteitsgelden') into community building and student participation. The HUGS (HU community for student participation) project originated from this. It includes various sub projects and initiatives that aim to support students. In line with this, there has been a decision to deepen insights and understanding about these themes through research. The findings in this research study aim to support and facilitate the initiatives and enable them to give the right help to students throughout the student journey. In addition, the findings offer inspiration and information that helps educational professionals improve their educational practice.

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HU Community building and  
student participation

Research study

Lectoraat Organiseren  
van Waardig Werk

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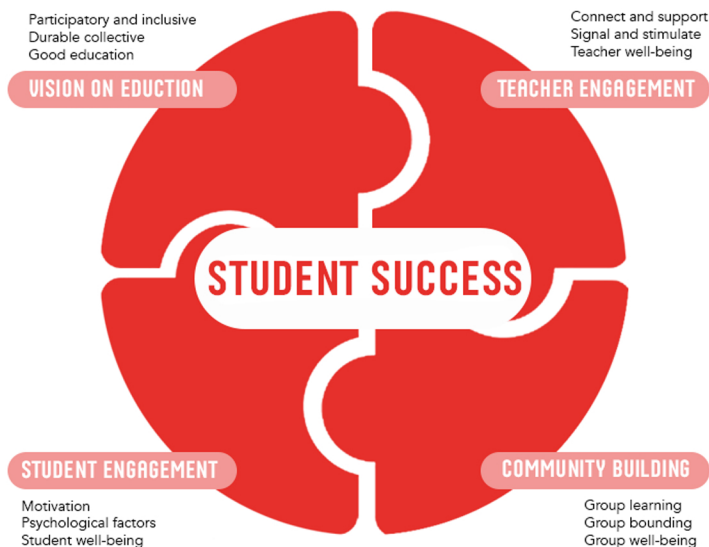
# THE HUGS-MODEL

Based on a combination of extensive literature research (Berends, Schulte, Dikkers & Savelbergh, 2020), conceptualization, field research and numerous interviews and conversations in educational practice, various insights have emerged and have been collected into the HUGS model. The model attempts to elucidate the multitude of factors that influence the student. It portrays a coherent image of what it means to put effort in, what we refer to as, student success.

We do realize that this theme encompasses a complex set of mutually influencing factors. Based on the literature review and interviews, we have clustered a large number of these factors. The intention of this model is to provide an overview of the most relevant factors in a clear and concise manner. The model is therefore not so much an all-encompassing conceptual model, but more so a starting point for further conversation about the topic.

This research publication dives into the factors that contribute to student success. Student success is determined by how education is structured based on a specific vision, the involvement of the teachers, the involvement of the student and of the community that they are both part of. These factors are further explained in the next sections. Consecutively, we draw conclusions based on the findings and share our recommendations regarding student success.

What can you do with this as a stakeholder or an educational professional? Open the dialogue about educational innovation and quality evaluation. Gather insights into the obstacles, challenges and opportunities. Try to unravel the mystery little by little, and think about how we can collectively influence student success through good educational practices.



# STUDENT SUCCESS

As far as we are concerned, student success is about the overall personal development that a student is subject to during their studies. This is crucial for students' participation in society as a committed professional. As such, student success is the primary focus of education. The educational process opens the door to qualification (knowledge and skills), socialization (social awareness and contact) and subjectification (individuality, freedom and responsibility) of the student and thus contributes to the overall development of the student as a person (after Biesta, 2015).

Previously, there was a lot of talk about student success with a primary focus and within the limits of getting a degree efficiently. If you earned your study credits each year, you were successful. However, the term student success is broader and focuses on facilitating students to undergo personal development so that they can make a valuable contribution to society (getting a degree can be part of this process).

Working on student success means that you look at what is of value to each student. You think of how an individual student can achieve success. You tailor this need to what the student experiences as success.

For one student this can look like getting a degree within 4 years, for another this can mean getting challenged and enriched outside of the study curriculum, and for another this can mean finding a healthy balance between studying and private life - maybe they even decide that this course does not fit them at all. For a homeless student, getting a degree can mean the start of regaining control over their life. In this way, student success is an open concept which is tailored to the individual choices and opportunities of the student.

**“ IT'S ABOUT UNLOCKING THE STUDENTS' POTENTIAL, IT'S ABOUT LETTING THEM LEARN AND FLOURISH FROM THEIR UNIQUE STRENGTHS AND ORIENTATIONS.**

Without pre-defining a set outcome, student success is about the students' potential getting unlocked, it's about letting the student learn and flourish out of their unique orientations and strengths.

# VISION ON EDUCATION

It's important to get a clear understanding of the vision and values that underlie our educational systems. The choices you make while shaping the educational structure and curriculum, as well as the pedagogical-didactic actions, set the conditions and boundaries within which the student can develop. Education that focuses on student success is based on a vision of participation, inclusion and sustainability. There is a continuous question of what actually defines 'good education'. We explain this briefly in the next sections.

Participation is about how we design our education based on active participation. An environment is created in which everyone can engage in all areas of education and join in during different phases of the process. Participation is about engaging others so that they can take ownership of their own education.

Inclusion is about the conscious choice to make education as accessible and as possible for everyone who wants to study. Diversity is considered in all areas; everyone matters.

Sustainability and durability does not just mean starting initiatives and projects related to the theme. It requires an organization to make room for structural changes.

Which circumstances set a good foundation for working on student success? Not just today or tomorrow, but continuously and structurally. New initiatives and temporary initiatives can be valuable, but alone can not structurally contribute to student success.

The values participation, inclusion and sustainability are not isolated concepts, but are particularly effective within an integral approach. Working on these themes is especially effective when everyone involved takes their role, not just the teacher or educational management. It is especially through collaboration that these themes come to fruition.

The question of what defines good education is posed by educational philosopher Gert Biesta. He mentions three functions of good education: qualification, socialization and subjectification.

According to Biesta (2015), it is mainly about continuously asking what defines good education. What does it mean? What is a good relationship between those functions within our context?

Parallel to the question of what defines good education, the question of what is a good educational professional is also posed. Which competencies do we want to see amongst students? (or even further: which competencies do you want to develop as a student?) What does this entail for structuring and shaping our educational system? This requires continuous dialogue.

Finally, a recurring theme in the vision on education is the realization that education is a rational process. Teaching and being taught happen within the context of a relationship between teachers and students, amongst students themselves, and within the environment in which we find ourselves. The factors that contribute to student success as discussed in the HUGS-model all relate to the rational vision on education.



# TEACHER ENGAGEMENT

Teacher engagement is about how the teacher\* enters a relationship with the student in which the student feels seen, heard, supported and stimulated. The teacher primarily takes the lead in forming this relationship. Think about the first day of your studies, when students come to class relaxed, enthusiastic, curious and full of hope and uncertainty.

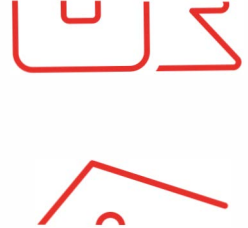
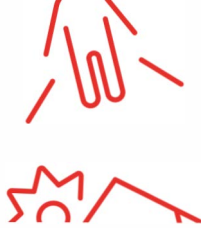
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The teacher welcomes the students and invites them to start an interaction. It is then up to the student to respond to this invitation. Without opportunity for interaction, it is not possible to build a relationship.

The intention behind the interaction guides how the relationship evolves. The quality of the relationship also influences the opportunities for learning and development. “Hello, welcome, I’ll teach you how to get your degree within 4 years” will lead to a different type of interaction than “Hello, who are you? I want to get to know you so that we can explore how you can flourish as the unique person that you are”.

We want students to give direction to their own lives and learning. Initially it is the pedagogical-didactic task of the teacher to support the student. The need of the student to be seen for its potential appears to be universal. The involved teacher needs to signal and identify which other unique preferences and needs each student has. This is the starting point for conversation about what someone really needs and how the circumstances can be bent to fit those needs.

The teacher involved has the task of clearly identifying the student’s needs and desires. This way, a conversation can be started about what someone needs and which education and circumstances are appropriate.



A teacher can give room to the needs and wishes of students, and if deemed necessary refer them to additional support or challenges (think of a dean, the student support centre, honours or podium). The teacher keeps an eye out for the needs of the student. This means that they can identify opportunities and obstacles. The involved teacher plays an active role in ensuring the student accepts the help or challenge that is offered to them. The teacher invites, stimulates, activates, pushes, confronts and takes care of the student.

Given the scale of the task that the teacher has, it is important to also put attention on teacher well-being. This is based on the idea that you can only take care of others, if you also take care of yourself. Teacher well-being is about the teacher's well being in the greatest sense: physical, mental, psychological, social and spiritual. It is important to create an environment in which the teacher can focus on the important task of connecting with the student. Themes such as work environment, work load, team interaction, collaboration, autonomy, management, support, limitations and psychological safety are important factors in this. In short: all aspects that are necessary for a healthy, good, and happy educational professional.

Teacher well-being is not just the teacher's responsibility. Colleagues, team management and the directive board play an important role in how we take care of others and ourselves. Teacher well-being is thus not only about maintaining well-being, but also about further development, inspiration and personal growth. A point of attention can be that the teacher limits their relationships within the boundaries of the professional role. Not just offer support with personal issues, but also offer tools with which teachers can further develop personally and professionally. Different institutions make different decisions surrounding these themes, it is hard to have one right way for this.

\*with teacher we refer to the educational professional that plays a role in the student's development.



# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The relational process of education starts the moment the teacher takes a step in the direction of the student. Subsequently, it is important that the students themselves also take lead in this relationship. The student is open to what happens within the educational institution. Thereby, they have to take responsibility to participate and add to the educational activities.

The student shows, both in attitude and in behavior, that it is engaged in the learning processes. We often talk about how trust is one of the most important conditions to build a relationship. We think that trust is something that is given to us. However, trust is mostly something that you give, as much as you receive. Starting a relationship in which you can learn, requires you to show yourself, to be open for feedback and input of others. You make yourself vulnerable and touchable (Biesta, 2015). This means that you need to accept that life can be uneasy, and sometimes even painful (see also Vygotsky's theory). It is about being ready to not just go through education but participate in it. When teachers and students engage and participate, a flourishing learning environment comes out of it.

The student's motivation to actively participate in education is not continuous. Various factors influence the motivational level of the student. We make a distinction between intrinsic motivation (driven by yourself) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external reward). It is important to keep track of these motivators and strengthen or maintain them. The learning route that each unique student follows is not set in stone. It is a journey into uneasy and unknown territory. Meaningful education is not put off by this uneasiness and can even be fun.

When students take responsibility for their own personal development, it is not enough to just say "I don't like this, this bores me". But it is important to think about what you want to do with it. It is about being proactive and participating in your own learning route. Education with room for student engagement is inherently empowering and emancipator; the student learns that it has control and can guide their own life.

Student engagement is partially dependent on student's psychosocial factors. These are factors that influence the student's ability to learn and participate within educational institutions. Think about mental, social, physical, economical and spiritual factors. A model that gives insights into these factors is the balance model, in which safe and risk factors of self-developing people have been laid out (Bakker et al. 1998)

Student engagement is also about student well-being. In recent years, student well being has received growing attention. Psychosocial factors are what you bring to your educational institution. Student well being is about how you can maintain your well being during your studies. The positive health model of well-being gives an integrated view on well being (Huber, 2014).

Student well being is greatly influenced by how the educational system is formed. Is this a place where I can flourish or is it not? Why? This is about how much pressure there is on students, how much autonomy they have, how they experience connection, how they are guided, how their relationship is with teachers and fellow students, their place within their community, if they feel space to be themselves, and if the physical space is accessible and tailored to all of these needs.

**“ STUDENT SUCCESS IS THE RESULT OF SEVERAL INTER-RELATED FACTORS: THE INTENTIONAL DIRECTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, OF THE TEACHER, OF AN ACTIVE AND CONNECTED STUDENT AND IN THE CONTEXT OF A STIMULATING AND OPEN COMMUNITY**

# COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community building is about connecting people and building a valuable community. People with shared interests and values come together to work towards a common goal.

Group bonding refers to the level of connection that people feel within a group. This can either be social bonding or academic bonding, formal or informal (Kappe, 2017). In addition, there are huge differences in the quality of the bondings. It varies from a collection of individuals to a close knitted collective built on reciprocal openness and trust. With group bonding you can mention the quality of the connection. The stronger, deeper and broader the connection, the more development that can happen.

We already mentioned that learning is a social process that takes place in a social context. Not just between teacher and student, but also in class amongst fellow students, mentors, clients or colleagues in practice.

In the vision document of the HU (2022) it is mentioned that we work in learning teams. Similarly, student learning can be strengthened by learning with fellow students.

If we are conscious about the fact that learning happens when together, it will become more important to participate in community building and to build an environment that enables learning together.

In community building too, well-being is a big topic. A community can only flourish when there is enough attention on the well-being and ethos of the group. We have a common task to set the right environment and circumstances within our educational institutions in order for communities to flourish. Think of factors such as the physical environment (temperature, lights, circulation), common areas, and enough breaks in the schedule so that individuals have time to meet others.

# CONCLUSION

After discussing the factors we can conclude that student success is not something that comes easy. It is not just an outcome of following an educational programme. It is the result of various interrelated factors: the intentional direction of education, the proactive actions of the teacher, a participating and engaged student in the context of a supporting and stimulating community.

Within these factors there are a multitude of themes that can contribute or limit student success.

The HUGS-model gives an overview of all factors that can contribute to student success. It is a collection of factors that many teachers and educational professionals will recognize, but are not (yet) working with or talking about. This publication gives insight into what decisions need to be made in education. It can be used as a tool to evaluate which factors require more attention in order to guide students to more student success.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Start the conversation! Engage with each other and involve anyone that can make a change. If we continue the dialogue about developments, they tend to be more successful.
- Use the HUGS-model as a starting point to evaluate in what level (if any) you are giving attention to the influencing factors of student success within your educational practice. Don't see it as a prescriptive model that indicates how you have to do it, or that gives answers to your questions. See it as an invitation to explore the right choices and decisions.
- It is never finished; It's continuously changing. What works now might not work in the future, or might work better in the future.

The task of improving student success needs continuous attention.

- Working on student success asks for a context dependent approach. It is our task to keep evaluating how we are doing in the current situation, to ask the right questions and decide what we want to achieve.
- The HUGS-model offers an integral perspective: situations that we have to deal with are influenced by a multitude of factors and individuals. It is important to be aware of the relation between all the influencing factors. We have to do that together.

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