

Sutton-Smith Doctoral Award 2014



Eleanor (Ella) Kahu *Massey University*

Ella Kahu, Massey University, is the recipient of the 2014 Sutton Smith Award for excellence in a doctoral thesis in education. The title of Ella's thesis, *Inviting study in: The engagement of mature-aged distance students in the transition to university*, signals the focus of her study: the varied experiences of mature-aged distance students in their first semester of university study.

Students' experiences were explored using existing data from an Australasian Survey of Student Engagement and an in-depth study of 19 participants, using family interviews and regular video diaries. The findings illustrated the individual and varied nature of student engagement, explored the importance of space and time as key influences on students' transition to university, and theorised the links between academic emotions and student engagement.

Ella critiqued current understandings of student engagement, developed a holistic theoretical framework for engagement, and highlighted the connections between emotion and engagement. Examiners' commented: "This thesis usefully expands the current thinking on what the elements of student engagement may be. It develops a conceptual model that takes thinking forward in general for tertiary education and more specifically for organisations catering for mature age distance students. Its strength lies in its evidence base built on the authentic data drawn from the lives of students ... The conceptual model is a cornerstone of the thesis". "This is a high quality thesis in every respect. I hope the student is pleased with it and proud of it. I certainly would be". Massey University also recognised the quality of Ella's research, adding her to the Dean's List of Exceptional Theses.

Completed by publication, Ella's thesis includes five articles published in high-ranking international journals. One of those articles was a critique of current literature on student engagement. This has already made a significant contribution to the field. It has been cited over 50 times, in a wide range of journals and across a wide variety of disciplines and countries. Comments from well-known international academics speak of her contribution as perhaps the most useful synthesis of research into student engagement. Work from her thesis also won Ella a Best Paper in Conference award at the 2013 Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement conference in the UK.

The contribution that Ella has made to the body of knowledge about tertiary student engagement, and the impact her work has already had internationally, speaks of its excellence. Ella is a worthy recipient of the 2014 NZARE Sutton Smith Doctoral Award.

