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## Understanding our Successful Learners – What does our Research tell us?

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## About the Author

**Dr Brad Merrick** is currently Director of Research in Learning and the Barker Institute. His PhD examined the influence of motivation and self-regulation on student understanding and learning. He has co-authored several music textbooks combined with scholarly chapters, articles and papers that explore emerging approaches to teaching and learning, most recently in the 'Oxford Handbook of Music Education' and 'The Routledge Companion to Music, Technology and Education'. He is the immediate Past Chair of the National Executive of the Australian Society for Music Education. His passion is examining new research, pedagogy and emerging practice in education.

### About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

### About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

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# Understanding our Successful Learners

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### Abstract

At the start of 2018, the Barker Institute commissioned a study of a group of High Achieving students from the 2017 HSC examination, that invited students who were all-rounders and also those who attained success in particular subject disciplines to complete an online survey that contained a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative items. These items examined the learning behaviours, strategies, self-regulated attributes and character qualities that possibly contributed to their success and also defined their approaches to learning in their final year at Barker College. An overview of key findings along with attributes and characteristics that may contribute to successful preparation and completion of formal examinations are presented, while comments related to the broader co-curricular experience are also mentioned.

### Background to the Study

One of the key factors in determining the impact of learning is to ascertain an understanding of the characteristics and learner profiles of those students who achieve high results in external tests, such as the Higher School Certificate. At Barker, student achievement across a range of different subject domains and disciplines is a good starting point for research. By selecting students who are all-rounders in 2017 (attaining a result in the top band for 10 or more units of their study), students who attained a subject ranking (a position in the top of their subject within the state), or students who attained high ATARS (the University entrance score), the cross section of high achieving learners, their somewhat diverse subject pathways and the mixture of both boys and girls allowed for common features to be measure and expanded. The study used a mixed methodology (Cohan & Manion, 1989) and by also examining learning profiles of adolescents (Apple, Duncan & Ellis, 2015) this small but focused study sought to better understand why the students chose the programs that they did, what strategies and behaviours they employed in their learning journey, and what support mechanisms within the school and beyond contributed to their sense of self as they completed their formal school learning journey at Barker College. Part of the reason for developing this research was to investigate the factors from which effective learning develops, specifically through the reflections from the students involved in this process. This in turn, provided valuable data and statements which can then be analysed and categorised, providing recommendations from which future students, staff and parents can learn. This research provided a range of learning characteristics, self-regulated strategies, study methods and environmental observations related specifically to the success of these students. Consequently, the School can strive to improve the quality of teaching and also the quality of engagement from students.

## Methodology

Due to the location of the research participants, the decision to use a mixed method survey comprising both quantitative measures and spaces for qualitative responses was designed. This drew on existing areas related to the Barker College learning environment and experience, while also drawing on relevant literature pertaining to the profiles of learners. Of key interest to the School was the specific levels of behaviour that students attributed to the following “seven performance categories: learning processes, productive academic behaviours, growth mindset, academic mindset, learning strategies, affective learning skills, and social learning skills” (Apple et al, 2015, pp. 1-2).

Combined with these items and reference points, students were asked to rate various statements related to their school experience and to reflect on the various areas of their learning journey that may have contributed to their success, such as learning colleagues, feedback from students and staff, teacher qualities, sophistication of feedback, combined with study preferences and methods, and their application of technology based learning or more traditional approaches.

## Data from the Students

Although the data only represented a small sample of students, it also was a very focused and purposeful sample, which elicited a range of valuable responses.

These students were highly efficacious in their study and application, but also highlighted the following attributes that are worth noting. The top statements that they rated most highly in their responses about their own learning profile were as follows. These students:

- sought assistance from knowledgeable individuals in order to navigate through difficult situations
- wanted to improve future performance by seeking out feedback from whatever channel they can and turn this feedback into assessment
- did everything necessary to reach the milestones towards stated goals
- were constantly seeking new knowledge in multiple forms and from many disciplines by asking many interesting questions
- had a strong belief in a personal ability to succeed
- were energetic, passionate and invested in life by seeing the value, opportunity, and beauty in each new situation and person
- consistently used writing to think, clarify, and document ideas, plans, thoughts, and reflections
- took time to produce a higher level of learning and self-understanding, including the causes of actions and their decisions
- understood and appreciated the values, differences, and perspectives of others
- knew when, where, and what needed to be done in a timely and systematic way
- wanted to grow from every experience and set growth goals, self-challenges, and self-assessed their own progress while mentoring others

Students in this study were obviously successful in their learning but also acknowledged the importance of having a balanced sense of purpose, linked to their broader community and family. These students:

- felt very supported by staff and family
- were passionate about their learning
- scored highly in their organisation, time management and goal setting strategies.

These students had a predominant level of focus on the 'process' of their learning, rather than just looking to master their understanding of content. This aligned with the work of esteemed researcher Professor Barry Zimmerman, who highlights the self-regulated behaviours of highly skilful learners which includes having:

- a focus on learning goals and specific hierarchical goals
- a high level of intrinsic interest and self-efficacy
- a strong use of imagery and self-instruction
- an ongoing process of self-monitoring
- the desire to seek self-evaluation and feedback
- a high degree of strategy and adaptive behaviour, combined with
- positive self-reflections (1998, p.6)

Most importantly these students were passionate about their own journey and saw it in a positive light, more so than the negative perspective. This again, aligns with the literature from Dr Angela Duckworth (2016), who talks about the most successful people developing their passions through ongoing practice, so that these capacities become talents that lead to success. Again, similar to much of the research undertaken in the area of motivation and achievement, there is a need to develop learners who succeed and become more purposeful in all that they do. Most commonly, this is attributable to constant refinement, self-reflection and ongoing perseverance.

The study also highlighted that many students have a strong connection to others and their broader community, participating in the co-curricular aspects of the school and also valuing the interaction and shared experiences that these opportunities provide. These successful students placed a high value on friendships, their memories of their school, the impact of the staff, the support they had received and most importantly, the relationships that they had developed and fostered during their learning journey.

Many of these students had the ability to be optimistic, even when facing adversity of difficulty scenarios within their lives. This type of perspective was quite common amongst these students.

This quote which was offered by a participant encapsulates the spirit and overarching sentiment and thinking of these students. "Make the year as enjoyable as possible and embrace the challenges head on and reap the rewards. Try to ensure a balance between work and play, while also sharing the journey with those close to you and who care about you. Don't waste time thinking about the future. Focus on the exams-assessments in front

of you and do the best you possibly can in them. That way at the end of it all, you'll have lots of options to pick from and doors will open up. Set your sights beyond reasonable expectations and you'll be surprised by your own potential. It is better to live with the failure of falling short than the regret of not trying".

As educators continue to refine practice and curriculum in the 21st and 22nd centuries, the value of student voice will be more and more vital. This study highlights how their thoughts, perceptions and actions can inform so much of we do.

The key to the refinement of the learning process in the future will be the development and analysis of purposeful research that can inform the shape and design of learning experiences, while also acknowledging the capacities, skills and behaviours that are part of the successful learner profile. This research project into the highly able graduates from the 2017 Barker College cohort has highlighted these factors in a number of ways.

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