

Conceptual overview of Student Engagement

A resource from a *Leadership Foundation for Higher Education* Project

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What is student engagement?

We understand student engagement to have *behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions*, and *congruent (“positive”) and oppositional (“negative”) manifestations* of each of these. Our *working definition*, based on the literature, states that:

Student engagement is the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution.

The literature on student engagement shows clusters around three distinct *foci*, which we represent as axes along which individual initiatives or studies can be located according to their concern, or perspective, on that focus. These foci are:

1. Individual Student Learning

Along this axis, an initiative which had no patent concern with individual student learning would be located at 0, with way points along this axis including student attention in learning, student interest in learning, student involvement in learning, student (active) participation in learning, “student-centredness”- student involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of their learning.

Based on the evidence, we can state with a reasonable degree of confidence:

- Student Engagement improves outcomes;
- Specific features of Engagement improve outcomes;
- Engagement improves specific desirable outcomes;
- The value of Engagement is no longer questioned; and
- Responsibility for Engagement is shared.

2. Structure and Process

The second axis focuses on issues of structure and process, including student representation, students’ role within governance, student feedback processes, and other such matters. Location along this axis at the 0 point would denote that the initiative had no patent concern with the collective structural or processal role of student engagement, while way points along this axis would include “representation as consultation”, such as tokenistic student membership of committees or panels to obviate the need for formal consultation with students; students in an observer role on committees; students as representatives on committees (“delegate” role); students as full members of committees (“trustee” role); and integrated and articulated student representation at course, department, faculty, SRC/SU or NUS level (not *ad hoc* or piecemeal).

Based on the evidence, we can state with a reasonable degree of confidence:

- Student Engagement in university governance benefits student representatives;
- Student representation on committees in the UK is generally felt to be effective;
- High-performing institutions share several “best practice” features regarding student engagement in governance;
- High-performing institutions share several “best practice” features regarding student leadership; and
- Students in the UK are most commonly “engaged” through feedback questionnaires.

3. Identity

The third axis focuses on issues of identity. This can range from concerns about how to generate a sense of belonging for individual students, to concerns about how to engage specific groups of students – particularly those deemed “marginal” – with midpoints including issues concerning the role of representation in conferring identity. Examples of way points along this axis include engagement towards individual student “belonging”, identity attached to representation (module / course / discipline / institution / “student” role), engagement of groups, such as “non-traditional” students.

Based on the evidence, we can state with a reasonable degree of confidence:

- Prior characteristics do not determine whether or not students will engage;
- Engagement benefits all students – but some more than others;
- Engagement requires successful transition; and
- Some students experience engagement negatively.
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Does philosophy matter?

Underpinning different categories of student engagement, and so different locations on the above axes, are two models based on very different educational philosophies. We refer to them as the *Market Model of Student Engagement (MMSE)* and the *Developmental Model of Student Engagement (DMSE)*. Evidence of both of these models of engagement was found in the CHERI study of Student Engagement in England (Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009).

The first locates students in higher education primarily as consumers, and is based on neoliberal thinking about the marketisation of education. From this perspective student engagement focuses primarily on ensuring consumer rights, hearing the consumer voice and about enhancing institutional market position.

The second model locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers. This perspective places greater emphasis on student growth and development and is primarily concerned with the quality of learning and the personal, mutual and social benefits that can be derived from engaging within a community of scholars.

What do we know about student engagement?

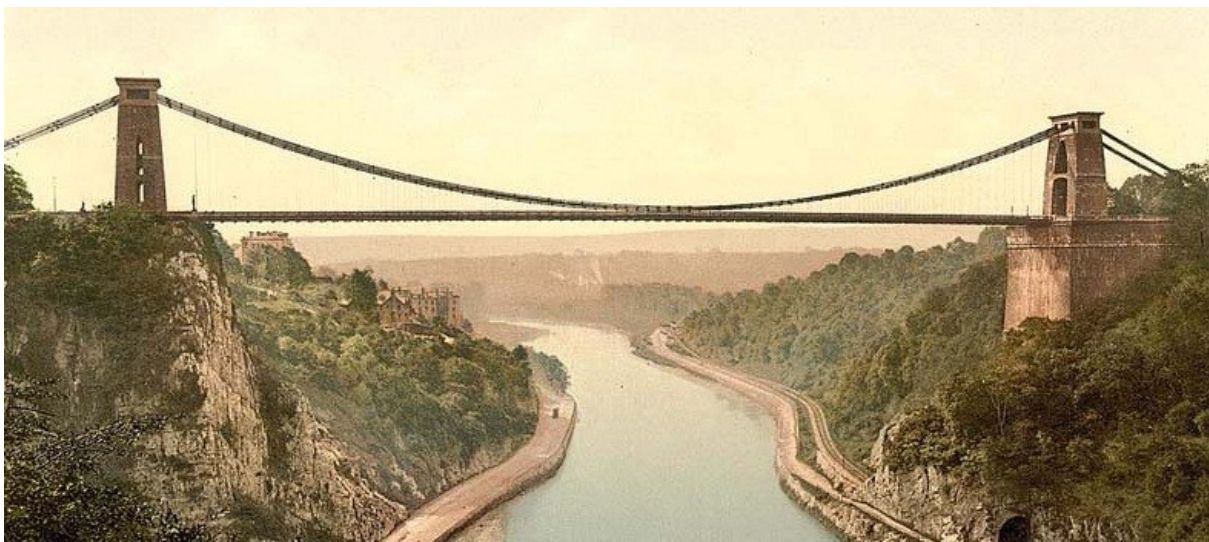
Despite the rhetoric on the (uncontested) value of student engagement for individual students, their institutions, the higher education sector and society more generally, there is very little evidence in the literature of students being engaged in issues beyond their own learning, as individuals, in any direct way. Students are typically presented as the customers of engagement, rather than co-authors, and where students are involved in shaping the design and delivery of curriculum, it tends mostly to be indirectly through feedback surveys, often with problems reported around closing the feedback loop. While student participation on programme or departmental committees has been found in several institutions in England, great variability exists at this level and there is little evidence of the nature, function or quality of this form of engagement. Engagement was found to be particularly beneficial to those groups of students least prepared for higher education, though these students are more likely to view engagement as a negative process owing to feelings of isolation, alienation or being overwhelmed.

There may be several different *targets of engagement*, including specific student learning aspects / processes, learning design, tools for learning, extra-curricular activities, and institutional governance. The *object of engagement* can be similarly diverse, including engagement to improve learning, engagement to improve throughput rates and retention, engagement for equality / social justice, engagement for curricular relevance, engagement for institutional benefit, engagement as marketing and engagement for economic reasons.

The *beneficiaries of engagement* may be variously conceptualised as students – either individually, or collectively - managers, the “engagement industry”, the Higher Education system, and society as a whole. *Effects of engagement* which have been observed include learning and development, belonging and connectedness, shared values and approaches and an appreciation of diversity.

Engagement as a bridge:

While student engagement has been depicted elsewhere as a ladder, a road or a tree, we visualise it as a bridge:



The bridge metaphor allows us to consider factors such as the environment, the climate, and the terrain while allowing that “journeys” are seldom simply unproblematic linear progressions from one point to another. The metaphor of a bridge also provides for the possibility of retreat back along one’s path, or for facilitating the passage of those who follow after one along a similar route.

HEIs decide to focus on student engagement because they hope that it will take them from where they are (current situation) to where they hope to be (desired situation) as the most effective, efficient, equitable or acceptable route. The desired situation might involve enhanced individual student learning for improved “throughput”; democratised institutional governance to facilitate efficiency or effectiveness of policy changes; or greater social justice or redress, to enhance the social integration of students and strengthen their identity. Knowing your “destination”, and your current “location” (how your institution is located in terms of your desired outcomes) not only helps you choose the best route to take, but also helps you decide where to start constructing your “bridge” – whether to choose the points which are closest to your “destination” so that your bridge will be easiest to build, or whether to choose the firmest, most stable foundation, even if the bridge may need to be longer to reach the destination from that point.

It is important to pay attention to the “terrain”, too. This requires detailed knowledge about the nature of your institution. So, having or developing an anthropological awareness of practices on the ground in order to better predict how innovations will be received is of great significance. In particular, it is necessary to be clear about whether the primary purpose of your focussing on student engagement relates to a need to market the institution, making it more attractive to students in return for the fees they pay, or whether it is driven by a concern about enhancing learning and student development. There are no right or wrong answers here: you need to reflect honestly on the location and context of your institution and its particular needs at this moment.

The “climate” involves those external threats and opportunities which require a response from the institution – funding cuts, changing student and staff populations, shifts in employer perceptions requirements of higher education, and changing popular perceptions about the value of higher education (to the individual prospective student, and to society as a whole), to list a few. The “bridge” needs to withstand these climatic demands while still allowing safe passage to the traveller.

The climate also affects the potential effectiveness of different leadership styles. In some climates a more directive, top-down approach is appropriate, with clear goals and specified targets. Elsewhere a “distributed” or “dispersed” approach to leadership may be effective, empowering colleagues and building on a collegial culture. Sometimes though, leaders are forced into a bargaining situation because of a conflictual climate : a “transactional” approach is the only way forward.

The “environment” includes others who are responding to those climatic demands – neighbouring or competitor institutions who may respond similarly or differently to the new fee possibilities; fewer or different international students securing visas; local students who may consider studying abroad in response to the new fees regime; large numbers of highly competent staff released into a

shrinking HE job market upon the closure of CETLs and Subject Centres; research opportunities opening up or closing down in response to policy shifts.

How is this useful to you?

Keep in mind the following when designing your “bridge”:

- Universities are characterised by organized sets of social practices – recurrent patterns of behaviour which are ‘engrooved’ and quite difficult to change. Changes often falter and practices ‘snap back’ to old models. Identify which practices you’re seeking to change, and what other practices could be affected as a result.
- These physical practices involve interaction with sets of ‘tools’ such as paper proformas, computer programmes, teaching technologies, physical artefacts and so on. An iterative process happens between tools and practices: the nature of the tools in use influences the shape of the practices and the practices influence how the tools are used. Choose tools that will change practices.
- Physical routines, being recurrent practices, are underpinned by the evocation of emotions and desires as well as by (usually implicit) sets of theories and assumptions. Sometimes what you can see most clearly is not the most important aspect of the practice you’re seeking to change: the affective and assumptive worlds can work to make change quite difficult, but they may also be used to effect change. Identify ways in which these affective and assumptive domains can help bring about the changes you’re seeking.
- Discourses are one part of social practices: the way the world is described in words, images and other ‘texts’ are very significant in enhancement efforts.. Affective and assumptive domains underpin these too, It is very easy to cause adverse reactions by inappropriate use of discourse of different sorts. Be aware of your use of discourse and its appropriateness in the context in which you’re using it.
- Identities, both personal and professional, are tied up with current practices. Attempting to change practices fundamentally can also involve identity change, and this can be threatening and difficult. Be aware of how identity could be threatened by your proposed change, and use those identity resources positively to strengthen your intervention.
- The most effective way to bring about change is to start with where people already are in terms of their practices and work from that. Be aware that proposals for change are hardly ever just technical, but impinge on interests, identities and emotions. Fashion tools in ways which guide practices in the desired direction.
- Expect different outcomes in different locations because of different established practices there. Present proposals for change in low enough resolution to allow domestication to occur (adaptation to fit local circumstances).

Once you have this understanding, there are three key words you need to remember:

Salience (how important enhancement initiatives are in relation to the many others coming at staff and students)

Congruence (how they fit in, or don’t, with current practices)

Profitability (how far current sets of interests and priorities are met, and how these can be altered)

These translate into the following specific questions about student engagement for leaders to address:

1. **Salience:** how important is this student engagement initiative in your institution compared to other initiatives? How can you stop it becoming just another thing to be done, which quickly becomes deprioritised?
2. **Congruence:** Which of the approaches to student engagement do you wish to enhance in your institution? Is it the most congruent with the character of the place in terms of current practices?
3. **Profitability:** In what ways would these intended changes benefit the various groups involved: staff; students; managers? Would the benefits be obvious to them? If not, what might persuade them of these benefits?
4. Based on the propositions about change set out above, what change strategies can you adopt that are likely to shift established practices in the desired direction? In particular what tools are likely to help do this?
5. Consider the critical success factors set out on the Student Engagement website (see below). Compare these with the situation at your institution. What needs to be addressed in relation to your plans for enhancement?

How do you know when you are there?

Surveys (such as the NSS, NSSE, AUSSE, SASSE, or others – see list) can provide useful baseline data to create “before” and “after” snapshots.

Indicators of student success can serve as useful proxies if you are able to establish clear correlation and causality.

Building in guidelines for evaluation at the outset of the project helps with monitoring throughout the project, as well as summative evaluation at the end.

Resources

The original work on which we base these statements is here:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/studentengagement/Research_and_evidence_base_for_student_engagement

In addition we have a dedicated website to support this resource: <https://sakai.lancs.ac.uk>

(login with username: sakai.guest@gmail.com and password: welcome)

This website contains links to other resources for student engagement from around the world.