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**Frameworks for Action I: Enhancing Student Engagement at the  
Institutional Level**

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## Framework for Action I: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level

For more information about student engagement, visit our site at:

<http://sakai.lancs.ac.uk/portal/site/8dcdf8f0-c5ec-4036-9f29-53d400048b3c>

### Who is this Framework for Action for?

This Framework for Action is aimed at managers in Higher Education. Managers are found at various levels within the institution, each having an important sphere of influence. Managers within HE include Vice-Chancellors and their deputies, Deans, and Heads of Department, but also programme leaders, module convenors, “Blended Professionals” who are team leaders or supervisors, and students in positions of authority. Having authority for a project, a team, a functional area or an institution is not necessarily the same as being a leader: being a manager depends on your position and location within an institution, and the authority that that institution officially vests in you; while being a leader is an orientation that an individual can embrace or develop irrespective of their formal location or position. While we hope that this Framework for Action will be of use to leaders in HE too, it is written primarily for managers in HE: those who will carry the responsibility for “making” student engagement happen (or not).

### Defining student engagement

We define student engagement as follows:

*“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.”*

### Categorising student engagement

We identify three axes along which the different dimensions of student engagement run:

#### Axis 1: Individual Student Learning

This axis represents a continuum along which individual interventions can be located according to their concern, or perspective, on the individual student learning dimension of student engagement. The overwhelming majority of interventions appear to be expressly concerned with this focus. Along this axis, an intervention which had no patent concern with individual student learning would be located at 0, with way points along this axis including the following:

- 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

#### Axis 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 intervention 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)
- Integrated and articulated student representation at course, department, faculty, SRC/SU or NUS level – not *ad hoc* or piecemeal

### **Axis 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.

## **Models of Student Engagement**

Underpinning different categories of student engagement, and so different locations on the above axes, are two models based on very different educational ideologies<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Ideology is understood here as a framework of values and beliefs about social arrangements and the distribution and ordering of resources which provides a guide and justification for behaviour (Hartley, 1983, p 26-27). Educational ideology, specifically, refers to those aspects of ideology which relate to the nature and purposes of education (Skilbeck, 1976, p 10). For a discussion about the effects of ideology on student engagement, see the discussion of critical success factors in our literature review on the Sakai site (URL on page 1 of this document). See <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/bib.htm> for references.

## Options for Change

It is clear from the above that the term 'student engagement' carries a number of quite diverse meanings. The danger is that people run the risk of talking past each other when discussing how to enhance student engagement within their institution, thinking they are talking about the same thing when in reality they are not.

It is important therefore important to be very clear, open and specific after carefully considering what is desirable, practicable and most likely to succeed in your context.

Making these decisions means asking yourself questions about your own context of implementation as well as about the approach to student engagement you wish to foster, and then considering how the two combine.

First, determine whether you are most interested in....

- Engagement for enhancing individual student learning
- Engagement for democratising institutional governance
- Engagement for social justice / redress, identity enhancement and social integration of students

Next, consider the nature of your institution. It is really important to develop an anthropological awareness of practices on the ground in order to better predict how innovations will be received. In particular, determine 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 outcome of that reflection will determine which of the two models of student engagement might be most appropriate, the MMSE or the DMSE, and where on the different axes of engagement your institution might best aim its enhancement efforts.

## Making Change Happen

Previous research, reviews and publications conducted from the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University suggest the following propositions about change processes and the best ways to make them happen:

- 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).

## Reflective questions

Gaining an understanding of existing practices on the ground is critical to the success of effective change processes.

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 change agents 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 page 1 for URL). Compare these with the situation at your institution. What needs to be addressed in relation to your plans for enhancement?

### Tools for Change:

Many resources are freely available to HE managers wanting to enhance student engagement in their institutions. These take the form of survey instruments (to assess current levels of engagement), case studies of successful interventions elsewhere, focussed studies on particular aspects of enhancement, and briefing guides directed at particular audiences, such as senior management, student leaders, or academic teaching staff. Examples of these can be found at:

<http://nsse.iub.edu/?cid=128>

[http://ausse.acer.edu.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=4&Itemid=3](http://ausse.acer.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=4&Itemid=3)

You can also find examples from links (under “Resources” at our Student Engagement site (URL on page 1 of this document)).

Our review of the literature on student engagement identifies both some critical success factors in initiatives for student engagement at the institutional level and a variety of implementation approaches that have been found to be effective. (See pages 33-43). That review is also available at our Student Engagement site (URL on page 1 of this document).

### References

Hartley, A. 1983, Ideology and Organisational Behaviour. *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, 13, 3 p 26-27.

Little, B., Locke, W., Scesa, A. & Williams, R. 2009, *Report to HEFCE on Student Engagement*, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, London.

Skilbeck, M. (1976) *Culture, Ideology and Knowledge*. E203, Units 3 and 4, Milton Keynes: Open University.