STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

TOOLKIT FOR LEADERS

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Higher Education
Research & Evaluation
here@lancaster
This toolkit has been designed for use by leaders in Higher Education wishing to enhance and promote student engagement in, and beyond, their institutions. It can be used alongside the NUS / HEA Student Engagement Toolkit, which focuses on improving three specific areas of student engagement, namely representation, module feedback, and curriculum design. The NUS / HEA toolkit can be requested from the NUS (http://www.nus.org.uk) or the HEA (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

In this toolkit you will find:

- Conceptual Overview of Student Engagement
- Leading for Engagement in Higher Education
- Powerpoint presentations on Student Engagement
- Workshop Resources
- References and Resources
CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Introducing the concepts, the evidence, and how this might be useful to you.

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 \textit{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. \textbf{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.
**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.

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**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:

![Bridge Image](image)

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.

You will need to pay attention to the “terrain”, too. This requires detailed knowledge about 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 focusing 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 page 1 for URL). 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.
WHO ARE THE LEADERS?

“Leadership” is often used in literature as a synonym for “management”, but not all leaders are appointed to formal positions of structural authority, nor do all managers exhibit leadership. Leaders may be elected (rather than appointed) or may emerge informally without any formal designation of their role. What defines leaders as such is having followers.

Leaders may have formal line management responsibility for a team, a unit, a department or an institution, or may represent a sector (such as “students”, or “staff”) either through a formally recognised body (such as the Students’ Union or an employees’ union) or by public acclamation where they are recognised to be speaking on behalf of a constituency which may not be formally organised, such as “staff with disabilities” or “student parents”. While leaders of the latter, informal, type are typically not included in formal governance structures or consultations, their constituencies can nevertheless exert considerable influence in matters in which they have an interest, and their role should not be disregarded.

WHAT SHOULD HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS BE DOING?

From interviews and a review of the literature, Bryman (2007: 27) identified the following facets of effective leadership in a HE context:

- Providing direction
- Creating a structure to support the direction
- Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment
- Establishing trustworthiness as a leader
- Having personal integrity
- Having credibility to act as a role model
- Facilitating participation in decision-making, and consultation
- Providing communication about developments
- Representing the department / institution [or sector] to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf
- Respecting existing cultures while seeking to instil values through a vision for the department / institution [or sector]
- Protecting staff [or sectoral] autonomy.
He also identified the following as “likely to cause damage”:

- Failing to consult
- Not respecting existing values
- Actions that undermine collegiality
- Not promoting the interests of those for whom the leader is responsible
- Being uninvolved in the life of the department / institution [or sector]
- Undermining autonomy
- Allowing the department / institution [or sector] to drift

**LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

While there has been little research on leadership and student engagement in a HE context, a number of studies have been conducted in the compulsory education sector. And while we should exercise caution in extrapolating conclusions from the compulsory education sector to the higher education sector, in the absence of similar studies in the HE sector these findings do raise interesting points for consideration.

**WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM THE COMPULSORY EDUCATION SECTOR?**

Aspects of central leadership – ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP, RESOURCE PROVISION and COMMUNICATION PROMOTION – can promote or enhance student engagement.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP has been shown (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000: 124) to have a “significant although weak” effect on student engagement.

Student engagement obviates the need for centralised top-down leadership, allowing for more dispersed forms of leadership as students – through their engagement with their learning and with the institution – INTERNALISE VALUES and IDENTIFY WITH INSTITUTIONAL GOALS and ABSORB LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES AND PART OF THE LEADERSHIP FUNCTION themselves.

**WHAT PRACTICES HAVE LEADERS FOUND EFFECTIVE IN ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION?**

- Bringing student representatives onto all kinds of university structures, including those concerned with changes to systems, structures or processes (such as building project boards) in material ways – such as equal numbers of staff and students on programme committees.
- GOAT (go out and talk) & GOAL (go out and listen) - speaking informally, and often, to leaders and representatives of other sectors (students, senior managers, staff
leaders, etc), to gauge their feelings and views, and developing strong personal relationships based on mutual respect

- Actively involving the university in students’ union activities
- Ensuring that the student representative system is truly representative of all constituencies within the student body, including “invisible” groups such as part-time students, student parents or students from elsewhere
- Active student involvement in the selection of senior managers with a high level of personal commitment to student engagement – and then holding them accountable to this commitment
- Reviewing procedures to ensure that these don’t themselves give rise to problems or complaints, and lightening the bureaucratic load
- “Closing the feedback loop” – ensuring that everybody sees the results and can celebrate the “wins” of engagement
- For managers and staff, wanting to see things from students’ perspectives, and being genuinely committed to ensuring students have a positive experience at university
- Shifting the official rhetoric to reflect a genuine prioritisation of partnership and community, and the prioritisation of student engagement, and ensuring consistent messages from senior management
- Not being A Manager – working against a “managerial” image to connect in a way that is meaningful to students / staff
- Replacing a culture of compliance with a culture of permission, tolerating “mess” and uncertainty
- Dogged persistence until the mindset and the culture change, so that collaborative approaches become automatic and can be self-sustaining
- “Finding the right people”

**CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS**

- Student engagement initiatives need to be part of a broader, supportive “engagement culture” if they are to thrive sustainably.
  - Cultivate a “culture of permission” rather than a “culture of compliance”
  - Systems, structures and processes should support engagement, should themselves not create problems, and should lighten the bureaucratic load as far as possible.
- Leaders at all levels need to be credible, consistent and demonstrate integrity.
  - Draw on appropriate discursive repertoires. “Throughput” and “retention” matter to Boards of Governors; “Persistence” and “graduation” matter to students and staff.
Small symbolic gestures and more material investments both matter – especially when these are consistent with the rhetoric.

Followers need to be convinced that their leaders have their best interests at heart.
- Authentically speaking with their “voice” to advance the interests of the group
- Protecting their autonomy
- Respecting existing cultures / practices while inspiring a new vision / new values in the group

It starts with respect
- from all sides
- for all parties.

Successful student engagement involves true partnership
- All sectors working towards common goals
- Each sector involves the other/s in their “own” business
- Power is shared appropriately and genuinely

Community matters, whether it is defined
- Geographically
- Through a discipline or discipline cluster
- Through a group defined by similar circumstances or interests.

What matters is belonging to something bigger than a programme, a department or an institution.

Communication is vital
- with followers, and with other groups.
- GOAT (go out and talk) and GOAL (go out and listen) create trust as well as sharing information, feelings and views
- “Closing the feedback loop” makes the “wins” visible to all

Enlist the right people
- Passion and persistence pay off
- Role models and individual relationships can be extremely influential
- A little humility goes a long way.
Engaging with the Literature

Vicki Trowler
Workshop materials for “How wicked is Bipolar Engagement?!“

The materials consist of a handout (bipolar.pdf) explaining the concepts, and a set of props (this document) containing an agenda, three completed application forms (two sides each – one completed by “the applicant”, and one by “their referee”) with a blank application form at the end (should you wish to add or substitute “applicants”) and eight role cards (for cutting and laminating).

The facilitator assumes the role of Chair, constituting the workshop participants into the Award Committee. The eight role cards are randomly assigned to participants, to ensure a diversity of perspectives and priorities. The meeting is then convened and conducted according to the agenda, allowing time at the end of the workshop for reflection.

These materials were produced as an output of the Student Engagement Project funded by the Higher Education Academy. Please cite appropriately.
How Wicked is Bipolar Engagement?

**Wickedity:**

"Wicked issues" are complex, non-linear, span conventional boundaries, require the gaze of many stakeholders, cannot be managed by single agencies acting autonomously, and depend on systemic change for real progress. The solution depends on how the problem is framed and vice-versa. "Wicked" can also mean excellent, amazing or cool.

The old school meaning of "wicked", implying evil or malevolence, is not intended 😊

**Understanding Engagement:**

In seeking to understand what is meant by "engagement", some authors have considered its antithesis – if a student is not engaged, then what are they?

Mann (2001, 7) contrasted engagement with alienation, proposing the engagement-alienation dyad as a more useful framework to understand students’ relationships to their learning than the surface-strategic-deep triad (Marton & Saljo 1979), since both "surface" and "strategic" approaches to learning are responses to alienation from the content and the process of study.

Krause (2005, 4) lists "inertia, apathy, disillusionment or engagement in other pursuits" as alternatives to engagement for the student. She describes (ibid., 7) this as follows:

> Physicalists use the term ‘inertia’ to describe the tendency of matter to retain its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line. In the case of some students ... inertia is a germane term to describe their attitude towards university and their role in it. In this context I favour the term ‘inertia’ over disengagement. The latter suggests an active detachment or separation, whereas the former is more suggestive of doing nothing, which aptly depicts the state of being for a group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage in their learning community. For some students, the interfacing of individual and institutional interests, foibles and aspirations never occurs. They do not choose or see the need to waver from their familiar path to engage with people, activities or opportunities in the learning community.

As well as the active, positive understanding of engagement typically found in the literature, Krause (ibid., 8) identifies two other interpretations of the concept. The first of these is the use analogous to "appointment", as in the phrase "I have an engagement at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon", suggesting that engagement with their studies was simply something to slot into their calendars. The second connotation was much more neutral:

> For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the university is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting.

This view of a "dark", hostile form of engagement stands in contrast to Mann's view of alienation as the diametric opposite of engagement, a conceptual conflict which we resolve through separating the passive response to alienation ("withdrawal", or "apathy") from the active ("conflict"), which is itself a form of engagement. We expand on this view, below.

Vicki Trowler / HEA Student Engagement Project
Multiple Dimensions of Student Engagement

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Scotlandia University Students Union

Special Meeting 31 March 2011

Agenda

1. NSETT invitation

SUSU has been invited to identify a delegate to represent Scotlandia University on a national think-tank tasked with designing a new student engagement system for Scotland. The think-tank will focus on student engagement with the quality of their teaching and learning, an area in which Scotlandia University has a good reputation. Because the nature of the task does not map neatly on to any of the current SUSU portfolios, SUSU decided to open the position up to applications from interested students.

The Students Union Exec has reviewed the applications and screened out those applicant unable to meet the time and travel commitment required by this position, and those who appeared more motivated by the generous stipend offered than by the nature of the role, and has brought the shortlisted applications to this plenary meeting for a vote on who to appoint as Scotlandia's representative on this think-tank.

The applications are enclosed. Following discussion of these, a vote will be taken on who should be appointed.
**REFERENCES AND 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 his resource: https://sakai.lancs.ac.uk

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

**SURVEYS, INSTRUMENTS AND RELATED RESOURCES**

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**OTHER RESOURCES**

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PROJECT DEEP STUDENT ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES FOR LEADERS

Promoting Student Success: What Campus Leaders Can Do

Promoting Student Success: What Student Leaders Can Do

Promoting Student Success: The Importance of Shared Leadership and Collaboration

Promoting Student Success: What Department Chairs Can Do

Promoting Student Success: Small Steps Campuses Can Take

Promoting Student Success: What SHEEOs and System Heads can do

REFERENCES


Breakwell, G.M, & Tytherleigh. 2010, “University leaders and university performance in the United Kingdom: is it ‘who’ leads or ‘where’ they lead that matters most?” Higher Education, vol 60, pp491-506


Pace, C.R. 1984, Measuring the Quality of College Student Experiences. An Account of the Development and Use of the College Student Experience Questionnaire, Higher Education Research Institute, Los Angeles.


