



Frameworks for Action II: Guidance for policy makers on student engagement

Paul Trowler and Vicki Trowler

Department of Educational Research

University of Lancaster

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

<http://sakai.lancs.ac.uk/portal/site/8dcaf8f0-c5ec-4036-9f29-53d400048b3c>

Who is this Framework for Action for?

This framework for action is aimed at higher education policy makers, by which we mean anyone who is involved in influencing the strategic direction of learning, teaching, curriculum or assessment in educational institutions – in this case universities¹. Thus while ‘policy makers’ clearly includes ministers of education, civil servants it also encompasses those in decision-making positions in institutions of all sorts connected to higher education. These include the National Union of Students, national funding bodies, quality agencies, specialist bodies associated with, for example, learning technologies as well as the universities themselves.

Policy makers in the UK are beginning to pay more attention to the internal processes of higher education as their focus shifts from mainly looking at the inputs and outputs of universities. Such inputs and outputs include the costs of higher education (and how they should be met) as well as results, dropout rates and student satisfaction, for example. A focus on student engagement looks *inside* the black box of HE institutions at the nature of the processes happening there rather than just the nature or quality of the outcomes.

HEFCE sees student engagement as "the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience" (HEFCE 2008)

For policy makers who seek to make such deliberate attempts, four key questions are:

1. What precisely do we mean when we say we wish to enhance student engagement?
2. Why do we want to enhance student engagement?
3. What can policy makers do to make things happen?
4. What should we expect to happen?

We deal with these in turn next.

What precisely do we mean when we say we wish to enhance student engagement?

The HEFCE definition above suggests that student engagement involves empowering students in the process of shaping the learning experience. By contrast the *Wales Initiative for Student Engagement Project* (WISE), an NUS Wales project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), focuses largely on student engagement in terms of student representation (see <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/News/Events/Wales-Initiative-for-Student-Engagement-Project--WISE/>).

¹ We use the term universities purely for concision – recognising that higher education occurs in other institutions too.

Our review of the literature identified these two sets of understandings and more underneath the general term 'student engagement'. In capturing those we developed the following definition:

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.

Unpacking that, we identified three axes along which the different dimensions of student engagement run:

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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.

It is important that policy makers are clear about which dimensions of student engagement are priorities (and which are not) so that resources can be targeted effectively. This clarity is important too so that all concerned are at least speaking the same language about the alternative conceptions of engagement, even if (as is very likely) they have different priorities with them.

Why do we want to enhance student engagement?

Just as there are different meanings underpinning the term 'student engagement', there are alternative sets of motivations for wanting to enhance it. They include:

- 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:
- Engagement for value-for-money

Again, it is highly likely that student engagement will be adopted in different locales for different reasons, and very likely that espoused purposes at the institutional level will tell only half the story. While this diversity in the purposes for engagement as well as multiplicity understandings of enhancing student engagement is probably inevitable, it is important for there to be clarity at the policy level about reasons for wanting to enhance it.

In addition, there needs to be alignment between a) understandings of, b) reasons for and c) the strategies adopted to enhance engagement. Having made decisions about this, the literature on policy, policy implementation and change in higher education and elsewhere tells us that it is *very* important to establish and communicate policy priorities, and to try to stick to them even in turbulent times. Shifting priorities and changing policy foci are among the most effective ways to ensure that goals are not achieved.

What can policy makers do to make things happen?

The literature identifies a number of 'policy instruments' available to policy makers and leaders of change. These are mechanisms of change, techniques by which policies and principles are realised in the form of changed practices and relationships. A number of different authors have categorised them in different but broadly congruent ways, focusing on the national-level policy in particular. Vedung (1998) talks about *carrots*, *sticks* and *sermons*, which speak for themselves. Building on this, Bleiklie (2002) distinguishes between the following: *authority tools* (statements enabling, prohibiting or requiring actions, backed by the legitimate authority of government); *incentive tools* (which give tangible rewards or sanctions for compliance or non-compliance); *capacity tools* (providing resources for increased capacity among different groups); *symbolic or hortatory tools* (the equivalent

of 'sermons', which seek to motivate actions through appeal to values; *learning tools* (those which facilitate learning by target groups to guide and motivate their future actions).

In the new environment of higher education a particular combination of these has tended to be put in place, emphasising in particular learning and incentive tools. Primarily these have involved target-setting and associated reward allocation measures: identifying performance indicators, then evaluating and publishing comparative results to incentivise improved performance and reprioritisation of goals.

On the basis of the outcomes of evaluative and other studies conducted from the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University as well as the theoretical perspective on change developed there, we recommend balanced mix of the different categories of tools Bleiklie identifies.

We enumerate these next:

Learning tools

First among these we would point to the surveys of student engagement conducted regularly across the USA, Australia and, more recently, South Africa. It is notable that these countries have moved to look at student engagement in their data collection from universities while in the UK we still focus on student satisfaction – a very different thing. We know from (for example) Australia's use of the Course Experience Questionnaire nationally, such data collection instruments can be effective in shaping institutional practices in desired directions (see Richardson, 2005; Prosser (forthcoming)).

While we do not recommend directly emulating those survey instruments (because we know that context is important in shaping appropriate tools), we do recommend careful study of them and adapting them for use in the UK.

Second we know that further developing the knowledge about engagement practices that is already in place in the UK and elsewhere can help institutions enhance their own practices. But again, not through direct emulation, *adopting* them, but through reflection upon and then *adapting* them for the local context. We have developed some case studies as part of this project as well as a brief summary of what the evidence tells us about 'what works' (available on our student engagement, referenced at the beginning of this document), but there is also a wealth of examples of practice in the UK and around the world that is available to learn from. Our literature review, also on our student engagement site, points to the best examples.

We recommend that policy makers consider how they can best help make such knowledge resources available to institutions.

Incentive tools

Policy makers often rely on the levers of target-setting with associated incentives and sanctions. Student engagement is an area in which this is a little more difficult because processes are less tangible than outcomes such as, for example, completion rates. However there are ways in which this can be done. For example:

- Including student engagement narratives and data in already-existing quality review mechanisms and associated reward mechanisms. Policy which frames "quality" in terms of

learning rather than teaching would require institutions to focus on what students are actually doing, rather than on what the institutions are providing for them to do or not do, as they wish.

- Resource allocation models could be partly predicated on the outcomes of such quality reviews.
- Including student engagement processes in the QAAs' (or equivalent) academic infrastructure, for example in its Codes of Practice.
- Making decisions, including possibly funding decisions, partly on the basis of the outcomes of a survey like the North American National Survey of Student Engagement would likewise act as an incentive to institutions to act on its results.

Authority tools

Because of their positions in government, students unions or elsewhere, education policy makers are empowered to set priorities and ways of thinking and talking about key issues. The discourse they use in policy documents and speeches as well as the principles that guide their policy making are important. They set the agenda, prioritising some areas of education and de-prioritising, even excluding others.

However sometimes policy is not joined-up, so that different arms of government (for example), even of the same department, are pursuing policies that are contradictory. This results in what is known as 'policy paradoxes'. Thus policies on funding excellence in research, and a resource allocation emphasis on that, can have deleterious consequences for the status and priority given to excellent teaching in universities, even though that is also a declared policy aim of government.

We recommend, then, that policy makers reflect on the impact of each of the areas of HE policy where they may have some influence and consider how, taking in the round, they address the issue of student engagement. It is important to seek alignment in them, and to look for ways in which institutions can be encouraged to align their own internal policies and practices (for example in performance management through criteria for funding or promotion, workload allocation models etc).

Capacity tools

Our literature review on student engagement warned against the prevalent 'magical thinking': that it will just happen on its own. Institutions need support and guidance on assembling the appropriate means to create environments conducive to engagement. Policy makers can assist in this by providing resources to assist institutions in developing knowledge, resources and practices to create such environments. Much is already known about how to achieve and enhance student engagement and it is important that these resources are publicised. The North American *National Institute for Effective Educational Practice* (<http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/>) carries a good deal of useful information and guidance, particularly its practice-brief resources found here:

http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm?view=deep/publications&ptab=DEEP_Practice_Briefs

Policy makers may be particularly interested in the more strategic-level briefs from Jacobs and Schuh (2005) and Ewell (2005).

We recommend policy makers consider providing funding for pilot projects on student engagement, for central knowledge resources that institutions can draw on (based in already existing locations such as the Subject Centres, the Higher Education Academy or NUS centres etc). Funding research into areas of student engagement where our knowledge is deficient, such as those identified at the end of our literature review, is also important.

Symbolic or hortatory tools

Finally, while symbolic or hortatory tools (using appropriate symbols and making exhortations by appealing to values) may have less immediate purchase on change than those set out above, they are nonetheless important in agenda-setting and giving clear messages to institutions and those within them about priorities.

We recommend that policy-makers consider carefully the way policy is framed, in words and pictures, on websites and in publications, in relation to student engagement. In particular it is important to ensure that in the policy push towards engagement there is access for the student voice - and that it is heard.

Finally symbolic tools are important to universities even where there are no direct financial rewards. In the years before its abolition the results of the Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Reviews would appear prominently on departmental websites (unless the results were not so good) despite the fact that there were no monetary rewards associated with its results. Departments gained kudos from high scores. The same applies to prominent displays of league table rankings from those who do well in them. Associating high levels of esteem with successful student engagement costs nothing but can be an effective incentive for universities seeking to enhance their reputation.

What should we expect to happen?

Previous research and publications around change conducted from Lancaster University's Department of Educational Research (eg Trowler, Saunders and Knight, 2002; Bamber, Trowler, Saunders and Knight, 2009) suggests that policy makers should expect, and plan for, somewhat different and more diverse outcomes on the ground than those they hope to facilitate through policy. We have elsewhere summarised this as follows:

- There will be different outcomes and different universities, and across departments within them. How 'student engagement' is practised, and indeed what it means, will depend on context, as workgroups adapt the concept to suit the context. This is both inevitable and desirable, as long as local versions really do result in more engaged students.
- Highly defined 'visions' of student engagement won't come to fruition as policy makers may hope and imagine because of the adaptive processes just described. Policy which offers broadly-drawn ('low resolution') guidance and requirements gives room for that to happen, and greater room for local ownership of initiatives. As a result such policy offers stronger grounds for hopes of success.
- Unless policy on student engagement is 'profitable' to universities, lecturers and others in ways which are significant to them then success will be limited. It is important to demonstrate such profitability to them.
- There will be pockets of enthusiastic take-up of engagement initiatives (by 'the usual suspects') and pockets of active resistance and subversion of them (from 'traditionalists',

amongst others). The major problems in policy implementation however will revolve around *scaling up* from local initiatives and around change processes peaking and then reaching a plateau or even 'snapping back' to the status quo ante as other priorities take over. Engaging institutions with this change initiative in sustainable ways is a key priority for policy makers.

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