



Student Engagement Executive Summary

Higher Education Academy Student Engagement Project

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Executive Summary

The project involved a survey of the literature and some further sources, and produced five deliverables (excluding this executive summary). These were:

1. A review of the literature;
2. A summary of evidence, abstracted from the literature review;
3. Six case studies of student engagement interventions, based in the UK;
4. Two “Frameworks for Action”, one for managers and the other for policy makers;
5. An interactive online environment (built on the SAKAI platform).

Deliverable 1: Literature Review

Literature on Student Engagement was searched and some 1 000 results identified, reflecting a wide variety and including a disproportionate amount of “grey” literature. Student engagement is understood to have *behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions*, and *positive and negative manifestations* of each of these. A *working definition*, based on the literature, was drafted:

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.

Three distinct *foci* were identified and represented as axes along which individual works could be located according to their concern, or perspective, on that focus. These foci were:

1. Individual Student Learning

The overwhelming majority of literature surveyed was expressly concerned with this focus. Along this axis, a paper 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.

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 work 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).

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.

Several different *targets of engagement* were found in the literature, including specific student learning aspects / processes, learning design, tools for learning, extra-curricular activities, and institutional governance. The *object of engagement* was 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* were variously conceptualised as students – either individually, or collectively, managers, the “engagement industry”, the Higher Education system, and society as a whole. Several observed *effects of engagement* were noted, including learning and development, belonging and connectedness, shared values and approaches and an appreciation of diversity.

Critical success factors were identified at the level of students, staff, the local context, institutions, educational ideology and national policy as well as across the levels. *Strategies for engagement* at institutional level and for individual staff were discussed. The literature review *concluded* with some general observations about the character of the literature, including its largely normative, uncritical nature, and the marked differences between US and Australian and UK-based literature; and noted some striking absences and silences, such as the under-representation of “traditionalist” and “social reconstructionist” perspectives, the paucity of literature on student engagement in governance, and – most tellingly – the absence of the student voice.

Deliverable 2: Evidence Summary

Abstracted from the literature surveyed (Deliverable 1), the Evidence Summary distilled findings of studies meeting criteria of “robustness” (having clear and researchable questions; using an appropriate methodology; presenting appropriate amounts and types of evidence to instil confidence, and drawing conclusions based on and limited to the evidence presented) along the three axes proposed in the literature review, summarised above. Caution was expressed regarding the situatedness and contextuality of the evidence, and wariness advised in assuming transferability from one context to another.

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

Student Engagement in Individual Student Learning:

- 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.

Student Engagement with Structure and Process:

- 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.

Student Engagement with Identity:

- 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.

In *conclusion*, the Evidence Summary noted that despite the rhetoric on the (uncontested) value of student engagement for individual students, their institutions, the higher education sector and society more generally, very little evidence could be found in the literature of students being engaged in issues beyond their own learning, as individuals, in any direct way. Students were typically presented as the customers of engagement, rather than co-authors, and where students were involved in shaping the design and delivery of curriculum, it tended mostly to be indirectly through feedback surveys, often with problems reported around closing the feedback loop. While student participation on programme or departmental committees had been found in several institutions in England, great variability existed at this level and there was 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 were more likely to view engagement as a negative process owing to feelings of isolation, alienation or being overwhelmed.

Deliverable 3: Case Studies

Six case studies of student engagement interventions in the UK were described and discussed. The case studies selected include interventions inside the classroom (cases four and six), outside the classroom (cases one and five), as well as both inside and outside the classroom (case study two) and the classroom itself (case three). They represent a range of approaches to fostering engagement, and different ‘takes’ on what engagement is.

Community Engagement at the University of Salford was the subject of Case Study 1. Three aspects of community engagement were discussed. The first was *SIFE* (Students in Free Enterprise), a global not-for-profit organisation that encourages university students to run projects that bring economic benefit to communities through matching the skills, interests and knowledge of student participants with needs identified in the community and developing student leadership, project management and business skills in the process while sharpening their sense of civic engagement and community responsibility. The second was student engagement in *volunteer work* which has been very positively received by local organisations, leading to a waiting list of potential opportunities for students. Finally the case study explored the *Salford Student Life Award* (SSLA), which is a structured programme designed to encourage engagement and to improve students' skills, enhance their personal development and boost their career prospects by providing recognition for extra-curricular activities and attendance at skills development sessions, as well as encouraging and supporting students in building a portfolio of engagement in a range of educationally purposive activities. This case presents an example of Student Engagement in "educationally enriching activities", outside the classroom.

Research-Informed Teaching at the University of Central Lancashire was the subject of Case Study 2. Aiming to engage students and academics as partners in a dynamic research culture, Schools at UCLan have conceptualised Research-Informed Teaching in four dimensions, namely: *Learning to Research* (research skills and methodology for students); *Learning through Research* (discovery through application and doing); *Learning from Teaching* (pedagogic research, exploratory and reflective practice); and *Learning from Researchers* (learning about others' research). Learning as the co-construction of knowledge is most fully exemplified in situations where students are not merely recipients or observers of research, but are themselves research-active. This case presents an example of Student Engagement as partners in a learning community, both inside and out of the classroom.

Case Study 3 explored ***Using "Creative Space" at Bridges CETL***. Inspired by work on the link between innovation and physical space, this intervention sought to engage students in more active, autonomous and collaborative forms of learning through the use of specially designed learning space (aimed at promoting intimacy, active participation and freedom from distractions), appropriate technology and supportive facilitation. The aesthetics, atmosphere and flexibility contributed to students reporting stimulation to think more widely and to participate more freely; being more engaged through enjoyment, playfulness and activity; and feeling more alert, safer and more respected, with students from a wider range of learning styles and needs feeling supported. This case presents an example of Student Engagement in individual student learning through the medium of the classroom.

Developing inclusive curricula in Higher Education to engage students with disabilities at the LearnHigher CETL was the subject of Case Study 4. Aiming to increase the engagement of students with disabilities and to improve their learning experiences through the embedding of effective inclusive practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design within the university, the project produced three deliverables: *a step-by-step guide to Appreciative Inquiry*; an *individual "Inclusivity Profile"*, and the expansion of the online *SCIPS (Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study)* resource to include 22 disciplines. Directly addressing calls for fostering the conditions that facilitate the engagement of diverse groups of students, this case presents an

example of engagement of marginalised students, addressing issues of identity in Student Engagement.

Case Study 5 discussed the *“Get Ahead” Conference at London Met University*. Organised by and for students, the conference was aimed at engaging and showcasing student energy and motivation. Besides directly engaging and developing the participating students, the conference also exemplifies to academics and university management some creative and innovative ways of engaging students, and demonstrates the benefits of engaging students rather than treating them as recipients. A number of deliverables were produced: the *conferences* themselves; *online resources* produced from the conferences, for students; and a *conference planning resource*. This case exemplifies Student Engagement in “enriching educational experiences” outside of the classroom.

Case Study 6 explored *Developing Online Community at the University of Gloucestershire*. Reflecting on a failed initiative (to build online community in a first-year Management module), this case explores issues around motivation for engagement in building online community among students who feel disengaged from the discipline. It concludes that course design should be sensitive to sources of passion and motivation, harnessing these to build engagement. This case illuminates the dynamics around motivation and Student Engagement in individual student learning in the classroom.

Deliverable 4: Frameworks for Action

Frameworks for Action are conceptually-based lenses offered to leaders to help them act in a more informed and theoretically illuminated way. Aiming to stimulate the reflective practitioner to think about their own context, about the nature of the change being considered and about how the two fit together, these frameworks have four elements:

- Data from practice on the ground;
- Theory;
- Associated concepts; and
- Questions for the practitioner.

Framework for Action 1: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level is intended for managers - including VCs, Deans, HoDs, programme leaders, module convenors, “blended professionals” in management or supervisory capacities and student leaders – those in positions of institutionally-sanctioned authority. The concept of Student Engagement is introduced and explored, with two models of student engagement (students as consumers, and students as partners) discussed. Prompting managers to reflect on the conditions and requirements in their own institutions, the Framework then presents a series of questions for managers to consider, and provides links to a number of tools which can assist them in planning their engagement enhancing initiatives.

Framework for Action 2: Guidance for Policy-Makers on Student Engagement 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, including ministers of education, civil servants, the National Union of Students, national funding bodies, quality agencies, specialist bodies associated with, for example, learning technologies, as well as the universities themselves. After introducing the concept of Student Engagement, the Framework then explores motivations for improving Student Engagement in order to enhance alignment between understanding of, motivation for, and strategies to address, engagement. Different tools to encourage change are then introduced, including learning tools, incentive tools, authority tools, capacity tools, and symbolic or hortatory tools, followed by a discussion of what to expect when introducing policy.

Deliverable 5: Interactive SAKAI site

An interactive site has been set up for people interested in Student Engagement. The site includes:

- Resources on Student Engagement (papers, reports – including the deliverables for this project, links to databases and websites and Student Engagement survey instruments);
- A wiki to collaborate and build consensus on definitions, understandings, information and ideas on Student Engagement;
- Discussion forums to participate in asynchronous discussion and reflection on issues around Student Engagement;
- Chat rooms to participate in synchronous discussions and reflection;
- Blogs – visitors can create read and comment on others' posts, and create their own, to discuss and explore issues around Student Engagement;
- Polls, to solicit or provide views and opinions on Student Engagement issues;
- A Dropbox to provide comment, feedback or input which can then be reposted anonymously by the site manager;
- A facility to upload and make available podcasts; and
- Other relevant tools, resources or facilities as they become available.

This site is available to anyone interested in Student Engagement, but does require a login. Logins can be provided on request (email Vicki.trowler@gmail.com to request) or you can use the anonymous guest login, as detailed below:

To log in:

1. Open LUMS Sakai: <http://sakai.lancs.ac.uk/portal>
2. Enter the username sakai.guest@gmail.com and password [welcome](#) in the top right area.
3. Click the Login button.
4. You will see two or more tabs in a row across the upper part of the screen. Click on the tab that says "Student Engagement".

