



Framework for action: enhancing student engagement at the institutional level

November 2010

This briefing has been prepared on the basis of work presented by Paul Trowler and Vicki Trowler that builds on the Literature Review and Evidence Summary that they have produced for the HEA¹.

Who is this framework for action for?

This framework for action² is aimed at decision-makers and managers in higher education. Such individuals are found at various levels within the institution, each having an important sphere of influence. They 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 authority³.

Perspectives From the Literature

Defining student engagement

Student engagement has been defined in many ways by a range of people in varying contexts. These definitions range from the “quality of efforts students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities” (Hu & Kuh 2001) to “deliberative attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience”(HEFCE 2008). The conception of student engagement used in the literature review is as follows:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested 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

Within the literature on student engagement, three dimensions can be identified:

1. Individual student learning

This is a continuum along which individual interventions can be located according to their concern, or perspective, on the dimension of student engagement relating to individual student learning. The overwhelming majority of work appears to be expressly concerned with this. Examples of issues may include:

- student attention, interest, involvement or (active) participation in learning;
- ‘student-centredness’ – student involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of their learning.

2. Structure and process

This relates to issues of structure and process, including student representation, students’ role within governance, student feedback processes, and other such matters. Examples relating to this include:

- ‘representation as consultation’, such as tokenistic student membership of committees or panels to obviate the need for formal consultation with students;
- students with an observer, delegate or trustee role on committees;
- integrated and articulated student representation at course, department, faculty, SRC/SU or NUS level – not ad hoc or piecemeal.

3. Identity

This focuses on issues of identity. This can range from concerns about how to engage specific groups of students – particularly those deemed ‘marginal’ – to more generic issues concerning the role of engagement in how students take on the identity of ‘student’ or how a sense of identification with and belonging to their institution can be fostered. Examples relating to this 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

Two models of student engagement can be extrapolated from very different educational ideologies. These have been described as: the *Market Model of Student Engagement (MMSE)* and the *Developmental Model of Student Engagement (DMSE)*.

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 such 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.

Making Change Happen

Options for change

It is clear 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, to consider carefully what is desirable, practicable and most likely to succeed in your context; and to be very clear, open and specific about the aspects of student engagement that you are focusing on.

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 focusing on student engagement relates to a need to market the institution, making it more attractive to students in return for the financial investment they make, 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.

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 in the different dimensions of engagement your institution might best aim its enhancement efforts.

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 with 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 relation to 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 in the Appendix, 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 in the *Student Engagement Literature Review* (see pages 36–42). 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 decision makers 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, focused 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> and <http://ausse.acer.edu.au>.

References

- Bamber, V., Trowler, P., Saunders, M. & Knight, P. (eds) 2009, Enhancing Learning and Teaching in *Higher Education: Theory, Cases, Practices.*, Open University Press / SRHE, Buckingham.
- Hartley, A. (1983) Ideology and Organisational Behaviour. *International Studies of Management and Organisation*. 13 (3), pp. 26-27.
- HEFCE 2008, Tender for a study into student engagement, Call for tenders edn, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Bristol.
- Hu, S. & Kuh, G.D. 2001, "Being (dis)engaged in educationally purposeful activities: the influences of student and institutional characteristics.", Paper Presented at the American Educational Research Annual Conference.
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- Skilbeck, M. (1976) *Culture, Ideology and Knowledge*. E203, Units 3 and 4. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Trowler, V. (2010) *Student Engagement Literature Review* (York: The Higher Education Academy).
- Trowler, P. and Trowler, V. (2010) *Student Engagement Evidence Summary* (York: The Higher Education Academy).

Appendix: Some considerations in introducing change

Research suggests the following propositions about change processes and the best ways to make them happen:

- Universities are characterised by organised sets of social practices – recurrent patterns of behaviour that 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 pro formas, 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’ is 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 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 that 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).

Endnotes

1. Trowler, V. (2010) *Student Engagement Literature Review* (York: The Higher Education Academy).
Trowler, V. and Trowler, P. (2010) *Student Engagement Evidence Summary* (York: The Higher Education Academy).
Both available from the HEA's website: www.heacademy.ac.uk/studentengagement.
2. Frameworks for action are conceptually based lenses offered to decision-makers to help them act in a more informed and theoretically illuminated way (see Bamber et al., 2009, for examples). They aim to get beyond the usual kinds of advice that textbooks and articles usually give: these are often devoid of explicit theory, are conceptually malnourished and are not usually connected to the daily reality of those in HE. So, any framework for action by change agents should be theoretically and conceptually robust as well as informed by data
Frameworks for action have four elements:
 - data from practice on the ground;
 - theory;
 - associated concepts;
 - and finally, questions for practitioner.
3. 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 institution officially vests in you; 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 also be of use to leaders in HE, it is written primarily for managers in HE: those who will carry the responsibility for 'making' student engagement happen (or not).