

Student engagement: paradigm change or political expediency?

Abstract

This article reviews the concept and measurement of student engagement, drawing on the approaches taken in the USA, Australia and now the UK. It critically explores these methods that impact politically on institutional approaches to educational practices, and draws on the current research of Hardy and Bryson (2008, 2009) and Bryson and Hand (2007, 2008) to make tentative conclusions as to a possible effective holistic approach to student engagement within the UK. It concludes by calling for a reframing of the concept, arguing that normative conceptions of good educational practices vary amongst institutions, programmes of studies and student subcultures. There can be no one 'quick fix' solution, it is a multi-faceted, social constructivist concept that should take account of students' sense of self and aspirations and the context they are in.

Authors

Christine Hardy, Learning and Teaching Coordinator for the School of Art and Design Nottingham Trent University and Colin Bryson, Director of the Combined Honours Centre, Newcastle University

Introduction

All parties in Higher Education have an interest in improving education outcomes. This overlaps with the imperative to enhance the student experience. Students need to be sufficiently engaged with higher education and learning to achieve their potential and gain from participation. Therefore student engagement is one of the most important concepts to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is a subject that has generated much academic interest, research and debate, particularly in the USA and Australia, and now the UK. Governments have begun to discuss and measure student engagement and relate it to the quality assurance and enhancement agenda.

We are concerned that in the UK student engagement appears to have been adopted to refer to student representation and the collective voice (and sometimes even customer satisfaction) rather than the engagement of the individual as 'a concept which encompasses the perceptions, expectations and experiences of being a student and the construction of being a student in higher education' (Hardy and Bryson, 2009). We note the work on student engagement in the USA and Australia which defines engagement as active behaviours – but this too underplays the sense of being and becoming and also of 'feeling' – with the social and cultural as important as the academic.

This feature will explore the concept of student engagement as articulated in these countries and draw conclusions as to its efficacy and implications for the political

agenda. We acknowledge that there are alternative viewpoints in these countries, but we focus on the dominant paradigms.

The perspective from the USA

Student engagement theory has its origin in the work of Astin (1984, 1985, 1993), Pace (1984), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Kuh and his colleagues (1991, 1989), amongst others, who found that engagement is positively related to objective and subjective measures of gains in general abilities and critical thinking. Student engagement is positively related to grades and persistence rates and institutional policies and practices influence levels of engagement on campus. From this work the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed in 1998 by a panel of experts in the field (including those above) and became a national survey instrument in 2000 in the US and Canada. It obtains, on an annual basis, information about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development and serves as a proxy for quality.

The definition of engagement is 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes' and is related to 'the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices' (Kuh et al, 2008). The survey invites students to answer questions about their study behaviours both within and without their current institution, their perceptions of their experiences and how they have contributed to their learning, relationships with others in the institution (including peers), and their future plans. These questions are related to five benchmarks (or dimensions) that reflect student engagement. The five benchmarks are:

Level of academic challenge – the extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn. This includes: class preparation time; working hard; amount of reading and writing assigned; coursework that emphasises analysis, synthesis, making judgements about course materials, and applying theories and concepts to practical problems or new situations.

Enriching educational experiences – participating in broadening educational activities. These include: talking with students from different backgrounds, political beliefs or religious commitments; using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments; and participating in work experience, community service, study abroad, and studying a foreign language.

Active and collaborative learning – students' efforts to actively construct their knowledge. This includes: asking questions in class and contributing to class discussion; making presentations; working with other students on projects during and outside of class; tutoring or teaching other students; and discussing ideas from reading outside class.

Supportive campus environment – feelings of legitimation within the community. This includes: satisfaction with academic and non-academic support, and quality of relationships with other students, faculty members and administrative personnel and offices.

Student-Faculty interaction – the level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff. This includes: discussing grades and assignments with lecturers; talking about career plans with lecturers; discussing ideas from class with lecturers; receiving prompt feedback on performance; and working with a faculty member on a research project.

The NSSE is administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and is now in its ninth year of administration. Its use is increasing year on year, from 276 colleges and universities in 2000 to 643 in 2009. In total more than 1,300 different colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada have participated in NSSE since it was first administered in 2000. The results are used for improving the student experience and engagement, but are readily available for potential students and parents to assist them in the 'college search process'.

The perspective from Australia

Understanding student engagement has become the focus of much research into the first year experience in Australia as it is recognised to be at the heart of student retention and persistence (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis, 2005, McInnis et al 1995, 2000). Based on the work of Tinto (1993) engagement is primarily viewed as an outcome of a combination of intentions and successful academic and social integration within the university environment. McInnis and Krause (2000, 2005) extended the view of engagement as a combination of intellectual application, diligence and participation in the learning community, which was underpinned by a sense of purpose. Based on the three major First Year Experience surveys in Australia, particularly focusing on the 2004 study, Krause and Coates (2008) have developed seven engagement scales as follows:

Transition Engagement Scale (TES) – the extent to which first-year students engage with university life and experiences during the transition process. This includes involvement with orientation programmes, seeking course advice, student identity and whether expectations have been met.

Academic Engagement Scale (AES) – developing the capacity to manage one's time, study habits and strategies. This includes self-awareness and agency as a self-managed learner.

Peer Engagement Scale (PES) – developing knowledge in collaboration with peers.

Student-staff Engagement Scale (SES) – the role academic staff play in helping first-year students to engage with their study and the learning community as a whole.

Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES) – students being challenged by the academy and challenging themselves.

Online Engagement Scale (OES) – the use of web and computer software to support learning and access resources, the role of ICT in promoting independent and self-initiated learning, communicating and building community using ICT.

Beyond-class Engagement Scale (BES) – students connecting with each other and the university community in activities beyond the classroom, both social and academic.

Many of these scales are reflected in the NSSE, with the exception of the focus on transition and online engagement. Subsequent to the work undertaken on the First Year Experience, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) introduced the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) to be used by HEIs in Australia and New Zealand to attract, engage and retain students and eventually to be factored into quality assurance activities.

The questionnaire builds on the foundations laid by the NSSE (above) and was used for the first time in 2007 with 25 HEIs in Australia and New Zealand with first year and later year students. Six scales of engagement are measured by the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), the first five of which are aligned with the benchmarks used in the NSSE. The sixth, Work Integrated Learning has been developed specifically for the AUSSE. It measures the integration of employment-focused work experiences into study. This includes blended academic learning with workplace experience, improved knowledge and skills that contribute to employability, application of learning to the workplace, industry placements or work experience and acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills.

ACER anticipate that the results of the surveys will be used in three discrete ways:

1. To enable cross-national comparisons to be made with relation to student engagement.
2. To enable insights from individual institutions to be used internally for focusing strategies and reviews, staff development activities and involvement of students in improvement activities; and
3. To improve external reporting, particularly benchmarking between groups, public reporting considerations, scholarly research and external quality assurance activities.

The emerging UK perspective

In the UK student engagement has not been studied as a discrete theme but embedded in studies which 'surface' student behaviour and attitudes. These studies include: the nature of the approaches to learning and teaching (Biggs 1999, Kember et al, 1999, Ramsden, 2003), transitions to HE and retention (Yorke and Longden, 2004, Aim Higher) and the antithesis of engagement, alienation (Mann, 2001). There has been no nation-wide study into student engagement to date, and little cognisance taken of relevant studies when governing bodies determine policy in the area of student engagement in the UK.

The National Student Survey (launched in 2005 as part of the quality assurance framework for higher education) focuses on student satisfaction with little opportunity for the student to reflect upon, or report on the quality of their learning or their role within it. In December 2007 the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills launched the student listening programme with the aim to amplify the student voice as part of its commitment to citizen engagement. In

February 2009 the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, The Open University, reported to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on Student Engagement. This report starts by identifying one of HEFCE's strategic plan objectives, which is 'to work with students and other stakeholders to ensure a high-quality learning experience that meets the needs of students'. To this end a number of agencies are working together to 'develop student engagement policies and inform institutional practices'. For the purpose of the study student engagement was taken to be 'institutional and student union (SU) processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, that seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience'. Recognition was given to the wider definition of student engagement but the focus is clearly on gaining student feedback, via questionnaires or student representation on committees, as part of the individual university's quality assurance framework. With the NSS this reinforces the view of 'students as consumers' rather than 'partners in a learning community', which is a missed opportunity for the UK to build on the work undertaken on student engagement and associated areas.

The Higher Education Academy's vision for students is to 'enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world' and they have identified student engagement as one of the three Academy-wide priorities for this academic year. There is recognition that it is not a one-dimensional concept and the need to develop a clearer understanding of the term. They are developing a 'spectrum' of student engagement, which has the following dimensions:personal

- development and self-learning
- curriculum design and delivery
- discipline level engagement
- school and department policy
- institutional level agreement
- UK policy

They currently want to stimulate debate on the meaning of 'student engagement' and invite interested parties to become involved in this debate via their website.

The work of Hardy and Bryson

Following the work of Bryson and Hand, our ongoing work is based on qualitative and longitudinal evidence gathered from individual students to seek rich data about student lives. Our preliminary findings have shown that student engagement is dynamic and multifaceted (and not very amenable into fitting neatly into any dimensions), both within and outside of the institution's sphere of influence.

In the first year student engagement is influenced by the students' prior experiences of education, their expectations and aspirations which effect their perceptions of various measures of engagement. Emotion is key – how the student feels. In addition, integration into academic, cultural and social communities at university is equally important for instilling a 'sense of belonging' or 'sense of being a student' which is a precursor for engagement. Student engagement is an individual fluid dimension, which is dependent on many factors, not least changing experiences of the academy,

socio-cultural influences, aspirations and expectations. Student engagement operates at many levels: the individual session, the module, the programme of study, the school/faculty and the institution; where there is a blurring between formal and informal student life, it has a socio-cultural and relational dimension that accounts for good teaching and learning experiences. Therefore, interventions designed to foster engagement have diverse effects because even students who share all sorts of attributes are yet individual in their response. For example, it is not sufficient just to create relationships, it is trust relationships which make a difference.

Conclusion

The USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have adopted measuring tools for student engagement that focus on student behaviour and relationships, primarily within the academy, that foster improved learning. Whereas in the UK student engagement is currently seen as 'giving a voice to the student' so that they can influence the practices of the academy, with little reflection on the students' own learning behaviours. The outcomes of the surveys are 'shared' across the sector and influence decision-making, both at institutional and national (and in the case of the USA and Australia potentially international) levels about where to focus resources. They are based on the premise that students and institutions are homogeneous and that there are 'good educational practices' that can be applied across all institutions and students to improve engagement and hence learning. Based on our own research, and a plethora of other studies, it would appear that this is not the case. Student engagement is a complex and holistic phenomenon that requires much more research to become a useful paradigm to improve learning in the UK.

'There is too much to gain in seeking a greater focus on student engagement not to pursue that goal' (Bryson and Hand, 2007)

Contact information

Christine Hardy
Learning and Teaching Coordinator/Principal Lecturer
School of Art and Design
Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street
Nottingham NG1 4BU
E: christine.hardy@ntu.ac.uk

Biographies

Dr Christine Hardy is currently Learning and Teaching Coordinator for the School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University. Her principal research interest is student engagement, including academic literacies, using mainly qualitative techniques with students to gain information (working with Colin Bryson and Len Hand). Her PhD work was on adult reading, which covered literacy. She is the author of the book *To read or not to read: adult reading habits and motivations*.

Colin Bryson is currently the Director of the Combined Honours Centre at Newcastle University. He is a National Teaching Fellow. His principal research interest is student engagement and he has sought to reconceptualise this based on primary qualitative evidence gathered from students (working with Christine Hardy and Len Hand). He has published and disseminated widely on this issue. This focus has led to further research on assessment for engagement and on student transitions. He is also well known for his work on supporting and developing part-time teachers.

References

Australian Council for Educational Research (2009) Students for Success

Australasian Student Engagement Report (online). Available from URL: <http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/AUSSE_ASERReportWebVersion.pdf> Accessed 30.10.09

Bryson, C and Hand, L (2007) The Role of Engagement in Inspiring Teaching and Learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44 (4), 4-14

Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (2009)

Report to HEFCE on student engagement (online). Available from URL: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/RDreports/2009/rd03_09/rd03_09.pdf> Accessed 23.10.09.

Hardy, C and Bryson, C (2009) Settled in well socially but just getting by academically: social and academic transitions to university at the end of the first year European First Year Conference: Enhancing the first-year experience, Theory, research and practice. University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands. 13 – 15 May 2009.

Krause, KL and Coates H (2008) Students' engagement in first-year university Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 33 (5), 493-505.

Kuh, G et al (2008) Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement on First-Year College Grades and Persistence *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79 (5), 540-563.