

## Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

### Found in Translation?: The new Language of Student Engagement

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It is at times of uncertainty that clear and concise data regarding the effectiveness and impact of any enhancement programme becomes most useful. In my experience, student engagement practice has in the past struggled to generate the in-depth, highly-analysed, statistical data on which senior managers so often find it most reassuring to base their major funding decisions. This situation is slowly changing, however, and the evidence for it can be read in the subtle but perceptible shift in the language of the student engagement sector itself. A quick scan across recent student engagement conference programmes reveals a recurring shift in theme: ‘developing’, ‘supporting’ and ‘investigating’, the buzzwords of yesteryear, have all been steadily replaced by ‘evaluating’, ‘assessing’ and, of course, the all-powerful ‘impact’. This thematic shift is also reflected in recent major cross-institutional initiatives, most notably the development of an evaluation framework for student engagement led by Liz Thomas and Ellie Russell in partnership with The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) (Thomas and Russell, 2017).

In seeking to explore, support and collate student engagement practice - particularly in relation to ‘hard to reach’ students - from across a wide and varied range of institutions, the Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation (REACT) initiative has presented a unique and welcome opportunity, not only for individual institutions to focus and take stock, but also for the broader student engagement movement itself to capitalise on this thematic shift and obtain the ‘critical mass’ of evidenced, statistical impact that individual initiatives may have struggled to achieve on their own.

At my own institution, it was certainly the case that participation in the REACT initiative gave us an opportunity to take a step back from the everyday delivery of individual student engagement activity and reconsider the whole engagement landscape at the University. In doing so, it became apparent that, although as an institution we had for several years been centrally delivering a range of highly-successful and well-established student engagement and student/staff partnership initiatives, there was a somewhat limited understanding across the institution of student engagement practice as a whole. Institutionally, we were also without an effective and efficient method for being able to collect and collate the sort of in-depth quantitative data and impact analysis that we wished for.

Working with REACT has allowed our institution to focus on this area and, in partnership with our students, to co-design and develop a range of tools. Though these tools may still be in development, they have been designed not only to map visually all student engagement activity across the institution, but also to gather in-depth statistical data on each student engagement activity and draw this data together for the first time. This data can then be analysed, the better to understand our student engagement landscape and assist effective future planning of institutional strategies, activity and targeted interventions. It is also hoped, of course (by my team more than most!), that, once analysed, this data will also provide clear evidence that student engagement practice at the institution is having a meaningful and statistically-significant impact.

So, what might be the long-term impact of a sector shift towards a more metric-based approach to student engagement? Already, I have heard several colleagues across the sector express what is perhaps best described as a sense of unease at this perceptible shift towards statistical impact analysis and data collection. For many, a qualitative approach to evaluation sits more comfortably with the underlying principles and values of student engagement practice. John Lea has long championed the notion that students and academics need to “*speak more in [the same] language*” in order to enhance engagement

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(Lea, 2016). Subverting that notion, however, it may also be argued that, by focusing on gathering and presenting statistical impact data, student engagement practitioners are beginning to speak the language of institutional decision makers who might justifiably be said to have been the real 'hard to reach' all along.

### Reference list

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